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BLACK SHADOW TRAIL
A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

FALL 1950

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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By T. W. Ford

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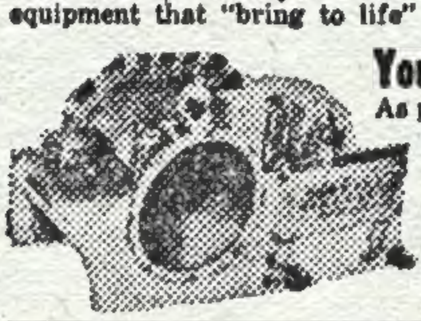

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HI, WADDIES, throw your twine on a cayuse, saddle up and we will hit the trail. We will take off for another trail jaunt and more Trail Talk, and I hope you folks enjoy it as much as I do. I like to ride along today's highways and wonder just how close I am to one of the old famous trails of early days.

Riding along today in our high-powered autos and noticing along the way the Highway Department's warning that the speed limit is 60 miles per hour during daylight and 55 miles per hour at night, I often wonder if we fully appreciate the old pioneers and trail blazers of the early days. They were of course much slower than we are today, but they must have been even surer, or else they would never have gone through to the completion of their journey and wrested our present West from the wilds.

They had no need for signs warning of speeds along those trails. Sometimes even ten miles, which we will clip off today in as many minutes, was a whole day's tedious travel for slow ox teams and big lumbering covered wagons, ungainly in looks.

We of the present generation would not be bothered with such slow and tedious transportation for a minute. But any American, especially one who lives in the West, or whose forebears were among those who trekked westward in the early days, will pause and look almost longingly at an artist's painting of an old praririe schooner and an ox team, or at one of the old-time wagons in some museum, and be proud to remark, to any who may be ready to listen, that his ancestors had a part in that era of development of the West when the prairie schooner and the stage coach were the principal modes of transportation for distances.

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The question that many persons of this day will find themselves asking is—why did they do it? Why did men, many of them with comfortable homes in the eastern part of the United States, leave civilization, and in some instances comparative luxury, behind and embark upon a perilous journey into a wilderness? Why did they venture where there was always danger? Why did they face hardships and privation? The answer is—"the American spirit of adventure!"

Those pioneers who blazed the trails westward, whose rolling wagons beat out paths for future generations, were probably not conscious that they were really a part of a conquering army that was invading a wilderness, an army that was to start the building of an empire, an army that was to give to us of the present generation a grand and glorious West, a rich West, rich in industry, rich in natural resources, rich in tradition and folk lore.

They were perhaps very little aware of the march of destiny. They felt heat, cold, endured thirst and hunger, fatigue and disappointment, they found no guideposts to tell them that they were on the right track, only the sun and stars to guide them, with here and there a landmark which had been described to them by someone who had been on some part of the trail before them.

They found the trail a mere skein of tangled ruts connecting two distant towns.

(Continued on page 8)

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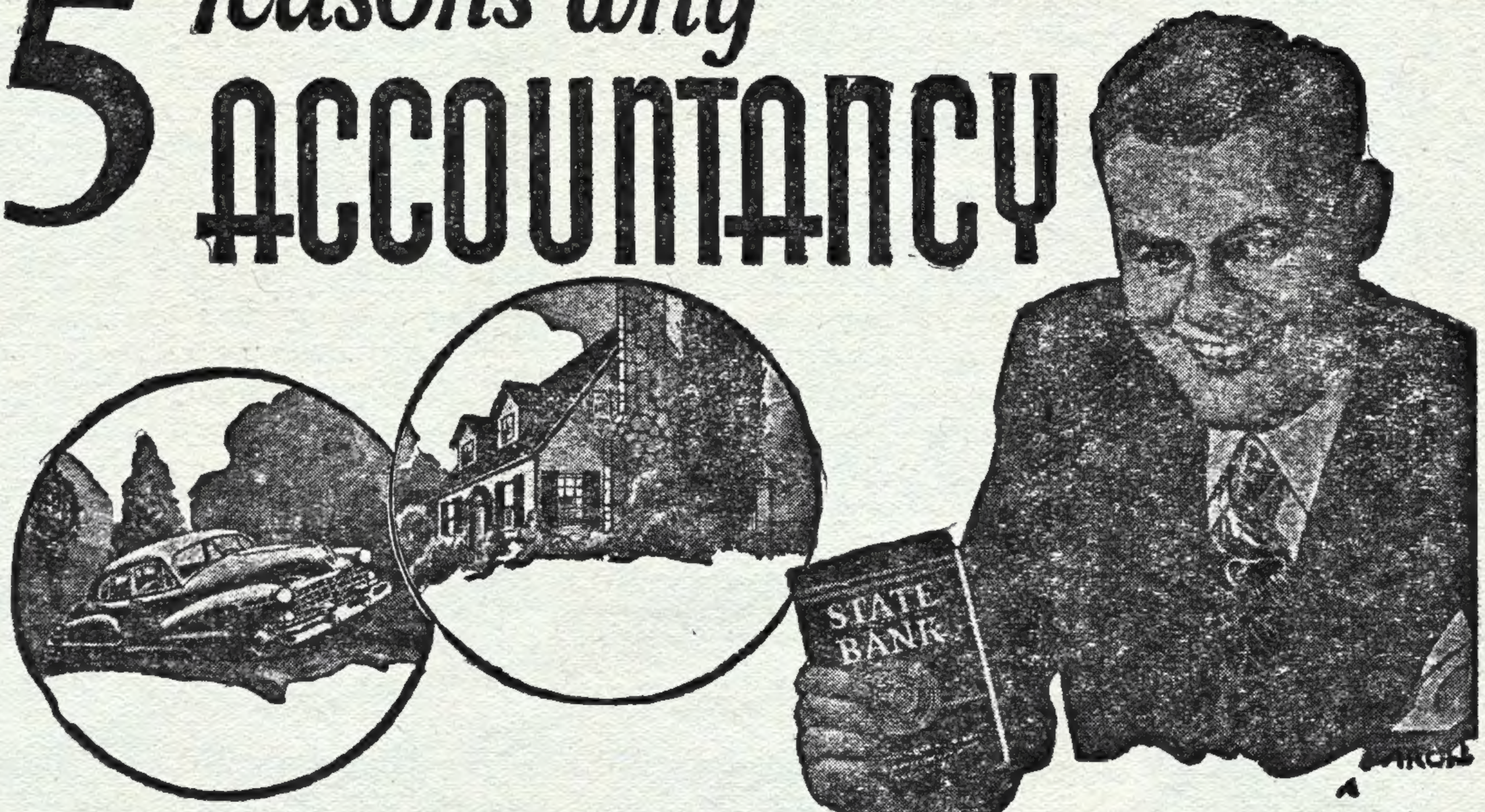

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

To them that trail was a perilous cruise across a boundless sea of grass, over forbidding mountains, among wild beasts and wilder men. It was not because they knew that they were doing anything for generations to come after them, that they dared the trail, but because of the lure of adventure. They were a type who loved adventure, who thrived upon danger. They were fortune seekers, most of them, while others were looking for new homes for themselves and their families, but they were all adventurers.

Those hardy pioneers could hardly have foreseen the innovations which have broken up their plains: windmills, barbed wire, cattle, farms, irrigation. The prairie ocean they knew and over which their prairie schooners moved, at what would now be called a snail's pace, has vanished. Their landmarks, or most of them, are forgotten. In about three hours by plane, or less than two days by motor, we can cover the length of one of the old trails westward, the Santa Fe Trail.

The Two Oak Trees

It has been more than 125 years since the first travelers started over the old Santa Fe Trail, and in that time there have been many changes in the country through which the old trail passed. Now we can skim along over paved Highway 50 to Council Grove, Kansas, one of the old landmarks of the trail, where there are two oak trees on the north side of the main street. One is where, as early as 1820, travelers would leave letters to be picked up by other wagon trains. The other tree is one under which the Plains Indians met with U.S. Commissioners in 1825 and signed the treaty which gave the government the right-of-way for the Santa Fe Trail.

On Highway 40, hardly an hour's drive from the spot where the old trail started, we come to Junction City and Fort Riley. The fort was established in 1852 to protect the trade of the Santa Fe Trail. It was first known as Camp Center, but after three years the name was changed to Fort Riley, in honor of Maj. Gen. Bennett Riley.

Another landmark on the old trail is Pawnee Rock. It is on Route 50 about 160 miles further west than Council Grove, and

(Continued on page 123)

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THEN I'D BETTER SHAVE RIGHT NOW. I DIDN'T HAVE TIME THIS MORNING

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BLACK SHADOW TRAIL

Morgan's roan struck a discarded wagon wheel (CHAP. VI)

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

BY T. W. FORD

CHAPTER I

Braggart in Danger

ABE PENCER slouched over the little bar of the ramshackle eating place at the crossroads where two stage lines crossed. He was half orey-eyed as he lifted another double slug of red-eye.

"Yep, shore made a nice profit on that herd I pushed through to the rail point at Toro," he bragged. "Lost a few critters in the quicksand at Hopper Crick. But when I hit Toro, I got the top price. Yup . . . Buy the house a drink on me, barkeep."

He was a middle-aged, flat-bodied

There's double trouble on the range when vicious despoilers trade on the Masked Rider's name and fame to cover their deeds of terror!

man with an iron-gray mustache, and wearing a sleepy smile.

The barkeeper came back behind the counter after passing around the drinks to the tables. A tall, rangy, blue-eyed man who was eating at a table off from the bar had refused. This man's eyes flicked from Pencer to the three men at the front of the bar. Two of them were small, pointed-jawed men, brothers maybe. The one in the middle was a big brute, sombrero pushed back and red hair straggling over his forehead. All three were well-garbed, toting a pair of hoglegs each, the holster tips tied down. They had the gun passer stamp on them. And they were taking in Pencer's every word.

"And I shore was slicker'n slobbers!" Pencer went on boastfully. "Demanded cash and I got it." He slapped the left side of his white leather vest. "Right smack on me."

The blue-eyed man at the table cut his eyes quickly to the three up the bar again. He saw their eyes jump openly to Pencer to note where he indicated he was carrying the money.

The big redhead nudged one of the others. Both smiled.

"Mr. Pencer," said the bartender, "yuh're shore takin' a—"

"Chance?" Pencer broke in. "Shucks, no! Bracken, my *segundo's* with me. Be along in a minute."

"Ridin' them trails at night is plumb bad business," the barkeep advised.

"Ain't aimin' to ride none at night," Pencer said shortly. "I'll reach Henryville before nightfall today. Bracken's swingin' up north to see some relatives. Me, I'll stay at the boardin' house there, then push on to the Swellfork, come mornin'."

The barkeep swiped at a big fly with his bar rag. "Still ain't wise, Mr. Pencer. Yuh got enemies up there in the El Toro Negro country . . . Huh, there's Bracken now."

"Ready to hit the leather, Boss?" called Bracken, a sawed-off tobacco chewing man, from the doorway.

"Let me down this drink, Brack." Pencer dumped it, then faced the bartender. "Yep, I got enemies, folks who claim I got an owlhoot bunch a-ridin' in my hire. They say I lend money on short term notes. Then this bunch raids a man's outfit, runs off his cow critters, burns his hay and the like so he'll be in trouble and can't pay. Then I foreclose. It's all cussed lies!" He whacked the bar with the palm of his hand. "I lend 'em *dinero* for less interest than the bank—on collateral the bank won't take. And I ain't got no raidin' lobos in my hire!"

He turned on his heel and went out the door. A few moments later he and his *segundo* passed the front window, riding up the trail.

"Somebody'll be usin' a hog-leg on old Pencer yet, and right soon, I reckon," the barkeep told the room.

The tall, black-haired man looked casually toward the rear of the place. His eyes drifted over an impassive-faced Indian also having chow, back near the rear wall. No signal seemed to pass between them, but half a minute later, Frank, the barkeep-owner, lowered a shot-glass he's just emptied, patted his bulging front, and goggled.

"Hey, where'd that Injun go to? He was there a moment ago. Now, like a danged ghost—" He lunged for the table in the back, and pulled up short. "By grab, he left a whole dollar here for his grub, anyways!"

The dark-haired man smiled faintly behind the smoke of his quirly. He had caught the thud of the hoofs of the Indian's pony, and knew he was on the road after Ab Pencer and his *segundo*.

THE three men still in front of the bar—the two pint-sized brothers and the red-haired bull of a man—were confabbing excitedly in whispers.

"All right," one of the little beady-eyed

men said. "One more shot of tonsil tonic and—"

The redhead clamped a huge hand around the back of the small man's neck and wheeled him around to the front door.

"Business 'fore likker, Willie! When we work this one yuh'll be able to stay orey-eyed for months."

Shoving "Willie" ahead of him, he and the other brother left the bar. At the hitchrail beside the place they swung up on their waiting mounts.

WAYNE MORGAN

The black-haired man had risen and through a side window watched them ride at a lope up the stage road that ran toward Henryville. The keen blue eyes of this man, Wayne Morgan, took on a hard, cold glint.

He paid his bill and went out to get his own horse, a rangy hammerhead roan. Before he mounted, though, he eased his twin .45s from their holsters and checked them. For Wayne Morgan smelled blood on the moon.

The purple haze of twilight was thickening when Morgan rounded a curve between cutbanks to look down on the somnolent settlement of Henryville. A few lights were already on. He reined in the roan as the cry of a mountain lion issued from the brush. The Indian who had eaten back at the crossroads materialized out of the shadows.

He was a stalwart figure, ramrod straight, with skin the hue of copper. His face was as impassive as a stone mask beneath the gleaming black hair bound by a white band. A bronzed hand rested on the stag-handled knife at his waist. But in the Sphinxlike face glowed pride of race, and loyalty and admiration for the tall man in the saddle.

"Senor," he said gravely in perfect English, "they are here—the big red-headed

one and the two little ones. Down there in the saloon."

He pointed toward the "Bar" sign with a coal-oil torch burning under it, the sole bar on Henryville's lone street.

"Good, Blue Hawk," the man in the saddle said. "And Pencer? Where is he?"

"Same place, Senor," the Yaqui Indian said. "In the drinking place. But the foreman, Bracken, still is with him. He leaves soon. Drunken Injun, me—" he spiked a thumb at his own chest, the shadow of a smile twitching at his lips—"he moves close to the three men, Senor. They say—who thinks the intoxicated Injun hears anything?—they will get him after midnight when he beds down."

Blue Hawk, educated in a Mission school, was not only intelligent but fearless. His whole life was dedicated to serving and backing the play of Wayne Morgan.

"Any law here—a town marshal, mebbe?" asked Morgan.

Blue Hawk shook his head. "Too small a pueblo, Senor." The only name by which the Indian ever addressed Morgan was "Senor."

"Where is Pencer goin' to sleep tonight, Hawk?"

A shadow fell over the Yaqui's face momentarily. "That I was unable to learn, Senor."

The tall man made his decision quickly. He said he would stop at the bar and see what he could pick up. Blue Hawk nodded and faded back into the brush.

Sloping down into the settlement, Morgan dropped off before the barroom and entered. Three customers were mixing beer and conversation, but the big redhead and his partners were not there. Nor was there any sign of Pencer.

Morgan strode up to the bar.

"Forty rod," he said to the barkeep. As the man pushed a glass and the bottle to him, Morgan said, "Mister, I'm a stranger here. Been pushin' up the trail all day. Where can a man get a room for the night?"

"They's only one place," the barkeep told him. "Mom Haslin's boardin' house. But she won't let yuh inside the door if yuh're orey-eyed. Place is right down the lane across from here. Yellow clapboard house."

Morgan thanked him, finished his drink, and left. Outside there was a low call from a nearby alley across the road. It was Blue Hawk. Wayne Morgan crossed over. He told the Yaqui he had learned where Ab Pencer was bedded down.

"Where's our camp?" he asked.

"Come, Senor."

THEY mounted and, Blue Hawk leading, passed behind some houses then cut into a lane like a tunnel under the heavy foliage of the trees flanking it. Moonlight splashed through as the evening breeze parted the branches. In that light the tall man caught sight of the sign over the door of a yellow clapboard house. It read:

BOARDING HOUSE—DAY OR WEEK
DORA HASLIN, PROP.

The lane petered out to a path, beyond the settlement. The path crossed the bed of a dried-up thicket-choked feeder creek, and Blue Hawk led the way down the bed, winding through the brush to a pocket formed by an elbow of the waterless bank. Behind it was their cavvy, their spare mounts, including the black stallion, Midnight, as well-known as the famous avenger who rode him.

Blue Hawk got a blaze going and soon had some sow-belly sizzling on a skillet, and a pot of coffee bubbling away. He also produced some Dutch oven bread.

After eating, Morgan lit a smoke and pondered on what he had learned and heard about Pencer. He was interested in that man and what he was sure was facing him, and meant to keep an eye on him. Morgan knew that if possible death were to be averted he would have to work swiftly, but not as Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, but as his alter ego, the Masked Rider, righter of wrongs.

Finally he tossed away his cigarette and spoke to Blue Hawk. At his orders the Yaqui saddled the black stallion, Midnight, while Morgan produced some cloth-

The Masked Rider struck twice, dropping the man (CHAP. I)

ing from his saddle-roll and made a quick change of garb.

In seconds he was no longer a cowboy, but a great black nocturnal bird of prey. He was garbed in a black shirt and black sombrero, with a black domino mask over the upper part of his face. Over his shoulders was a black riding cape of ebon hue, completely enveloping him. When he mounted the jet-black stallion the two seemed to make a whole.

The masked man and Blue Hawk already had made their plans. Few words were necessary between those two. So a little up from Mom Haslin's boarding house when they reached the town the Masked Rider left the black stallion ground-hitched under a tree and proceeded afoot in the now tomblike town. Blue Hawk dropped away somewhere behind.

The tall masked man was gliding

through a patch of moonlight when he heard the faint, warning rattle of a spur chain. As he plunged his hands toward the gun-butts on his hips a gun muzzle was rammed hard against his backbone. A man's voice, a little thick with whisky, but steady and hard, commanded:

"Get shed of yore hardware, mister! Real careful—don't forget there's bounty money on yore head! Dead or alive! I know you—Masked Rider!"

Calmly the masked man took out his weapons by the trigger guards, but he didn't drop them to the ground. Instead, his forefingers hooked through the guards with the guns upside down, dangling butts forward.

"Here you are, *hombrecito!*" he said in the gruff voice he used when in the rôle of the Masked Rider. "But you're making a big mistake." He extended the Colts.

As the man reached for one with his left hand, the hogleg in his other hand unconsciously dropped a few inches. Then what happened came as quickly as a cow flicks its tail in fly time. One moment, the butts of the upside-down .45s were held forward. Then the guns spun in an arc, held by the trigger guards. The next instant the butts were in the palms of the Masked Rider's hands, and the muzzles were baleful black eyes covering his challenger.

The Masked Rider struck twice. One blow of a gun barrel was across a wrist, knocking his assailant's gun to the ground. The next was a sharp wallop across the side of the skull, dropping the man, though he knew he was not injuring him permanently.

A couple of minutes later, the Masked Rider emerged from between a couple of houses. Behind him, the unconscious man lay trussed with his own gun-belt and neckerchief. And a bandanna across his mouth.

The Masker Rider continued on to Mom Haslin's place. He slid through the high grass, hunkered down in a little thicket off from a back corner of the two-story house which was completely dark, so that he could command a view of the back door and also of anybody who might turn into the path at the front. It was as still as a grave save for the chirping of night insects in the grass. Then the scrape of a spur rowel came from somewhere close by. The figure of a man appeared from the shadow of the small shed, crouched as he paused. Moonlight glittered on the brass studs of his shell belt as he edged from the shadow. Then two others appeared—the other small man and the red-headed giant.

CHAPTER II

Robbers in the Night

THE three marauders crossed the yard swiftly to the back door. There was a slight grinding sound, then the rasp of torn metal. The lock had been forced. They waited a few moments. But no stirring, no outcry, came from inside the boarding house. They went in like vanishing wraiths and the door was closed behind them.

The Masked Rider swept across the back yard, a menacing figure swathed in the long black cloak. He inched open the door into a large kitchen. The open back stairway ran up on the left.

He reached the top to find himself at the back of a long hall that ran the length of the house. It was an old place, musty smelling. He could see nobody in the dimness, although his eyes were unusually keen in the night. There were no sounds either, save for the snore of some boarder.

His drawn gun cocked now, he cat-footed along the hallway. Then he spied the big redhead following one of his companions into a room. The Masked Rider tiptoed down that way.

An insistent whisper reached him. "Wake up, yuh danged old money-bags! Where yuh got that *dinero* cached, Pencer? Where, or I'll fix yore wagon here and now!"

There was a strangling, choked-off cry of "Aw-w-k!"

Then: "Get that knife away from my throat!"

The Masked Rider stepped in and rammed his hogleg hard into the redhead's back. The big man went rigid.

"Stand hitched or get yourself a free ride to Boot Hill on a shutter," the masked man said in that unnaturally gruff bass. He saw the half-pint bent over Ab Pencer with a Bowie knife close to the man's throat. The half-pint jerked around. But the Masked Rider had snatched out a second gun to cover him. Then, for the first time, the masked man realized there were only two of the trio in the room now.

"Make one false move," he warned the little man who crouched back from the bed, "and you'll have a window in your skull!"

Pencer, stripped down to his long underwear, was clambering out of the bed on the same side where his undersized attacker stood. Thinking of the third man, the Masked Rider had many times known when a split second stood between him and extinction. He sidestepped along the wall.

The missing undersized brother plunged forward through the doorway and he rammed a cocked Colt into the back of the redhead, whom he had mistaken for the Masked Rider because of the similarity in height. In the dimness of the room, with the waving curtains making the shadows flicker, it was a natural enough mistake.

"Now just scratch the ceiling with them dewclaws, mister!" he bit off in a thin, brittle voice. "Don't, and yuh get it!"

As the redhead started to speak one of the masked man's guns whacked down. The little man staggered off against the side wall beyond the doorway. But the other pint-sized brother had grabbed at the chance the distraction had provided. He seized the still blurry-eyed Pencer and thrust him over sharply at the Masked Rider. Pencer stumbled into him, pinning him against the wall for a couple of seconds, unconsciously forcing the masked man's gun arms down. The little man darted for the door.

"Let's get outa here!" he bleated.

But the big redhead swung his guns around, fuming oaths.

"The dirty snake, I'll fix him!"

"Don't be a fool, Corlee!" snapped the man already halfway out the door. "We don't want no noise!"

The redhead and the Masked Rider triggered hurriedly and simultaneously. The masked man's slug just missed the big fellow's side. But the second of the half-pint brothers, was drilled dead center in the chest by the slug from "Red" Corlee's gun in that dim, fitful light. The Masked Rider stumbled off balance as Pencer half-tripped him in disengaging himself. And the carrot-topped man chopped down with his smoking gun barrel.

The masked man threw up his left forearm to try to fend off the blow. But the descending gun glanced off his arm, numbing it, and caught him a grazing blow that made his skull ring. He slumped against the wall, and his limbs seemed turned to damp dough. Somewhere a woman shrieked.

"Come on, Red!" the man in the hall called. "They'll be the devil and all to pay now!"

It took the Masked Rider a minute to steady himself. He swayed as he swung from the room into the hall. There was no sight of the escaping men by then. Doors had opened a crack and bars of light shone out as frightened boarders stared after the fleeing gunmen. But at the sight of another armed stranger, the doors were slammed shut hurriedly.

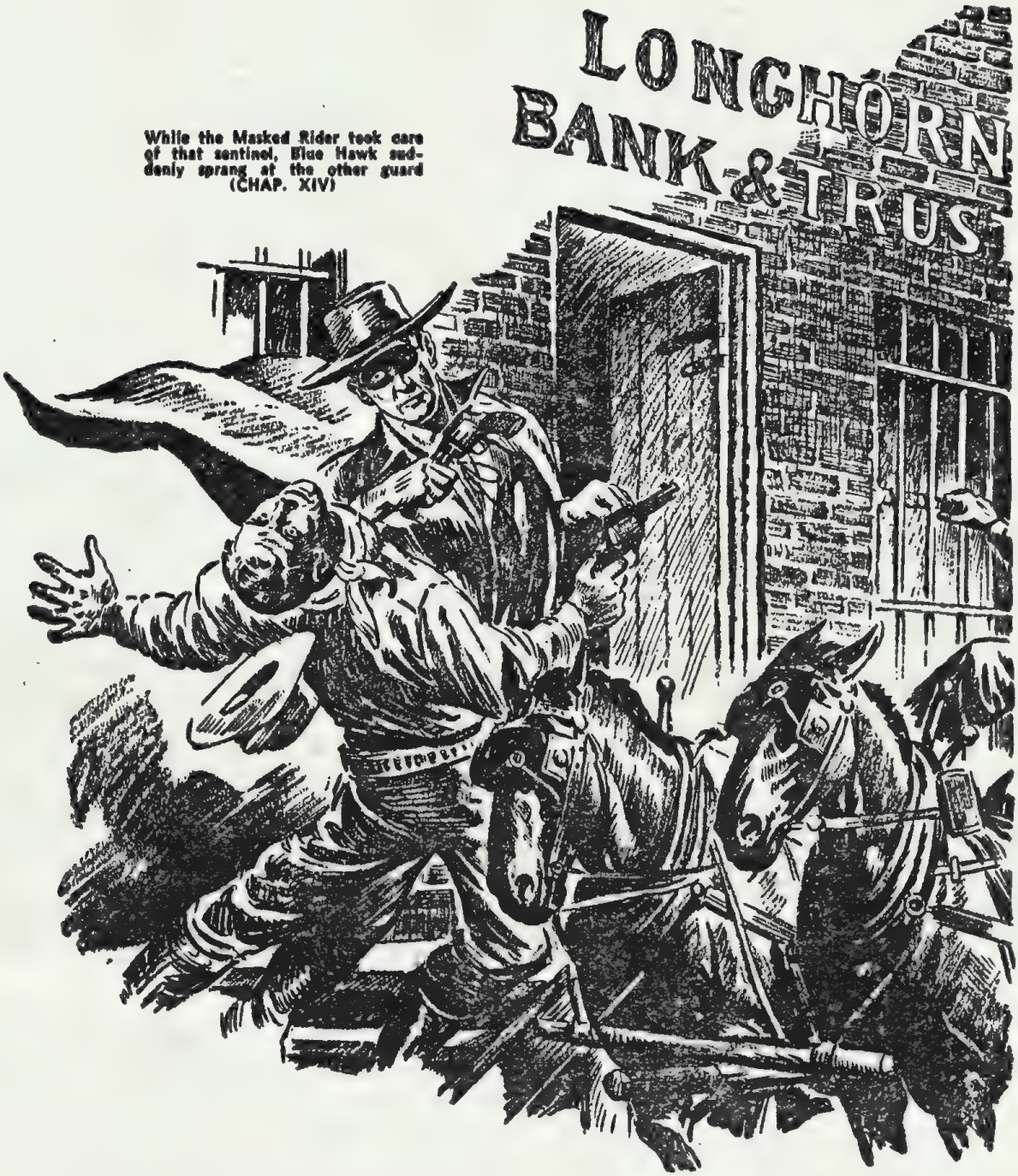
The Masked Rider clattered down the stairs to the kitchen. From outside came the sound of angry, excited voices. Maybe the polecats had been caught!

HE LEAPED out into the back yard—and into a trap. About a dozen odd men, weapons drawn, and spread out in an arc, were moving in on the house.

"There he is—the Masked Rider, the dirty snake!" one of them yelled. "Blast him if he makes a move!"

They had him ringed in.

The Masked Rider couldn't understand



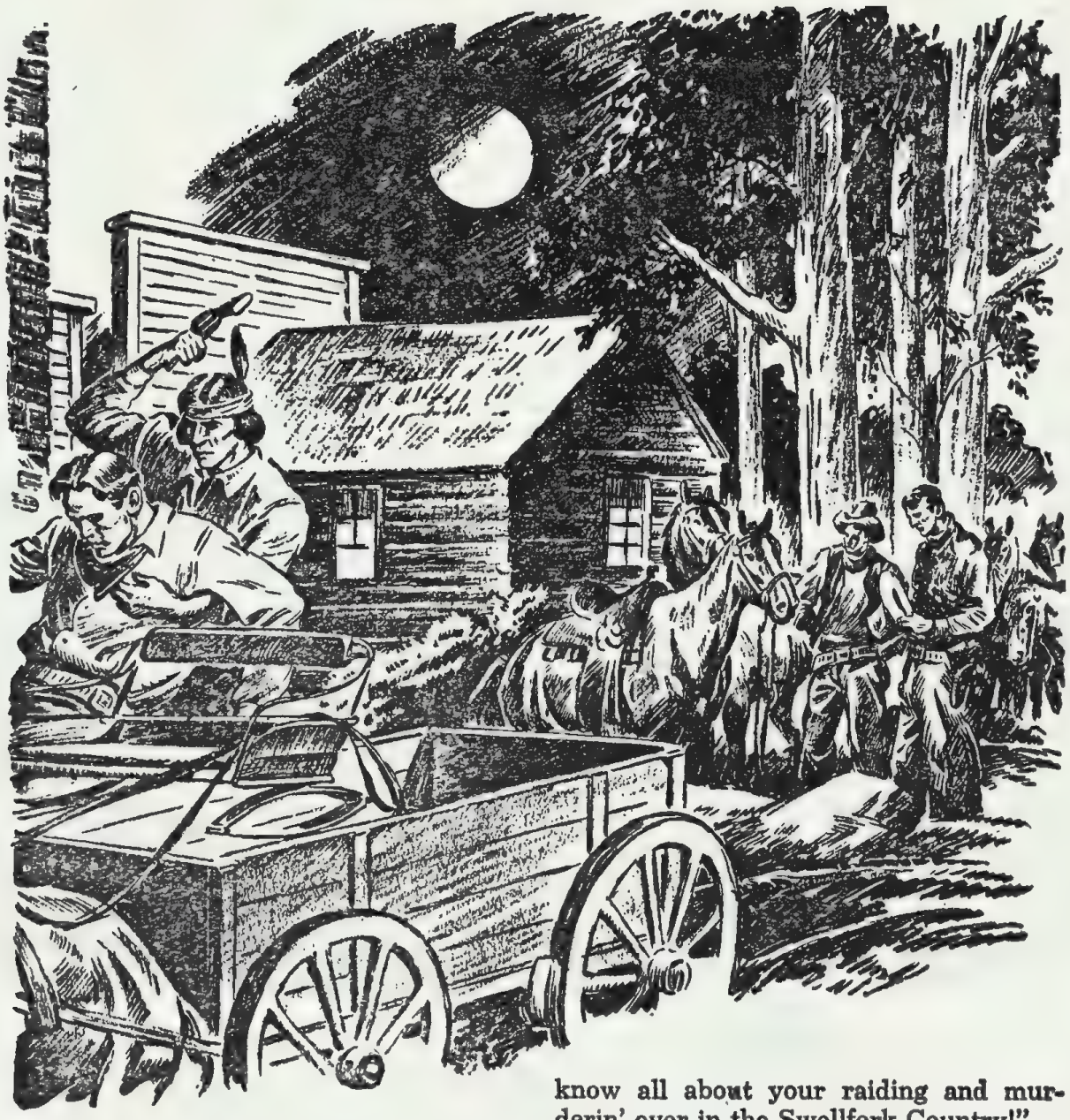
While the Masked Rider took care of that sentinel, Blue Hawk suddenly sprang at the other guard (CHAP. XIV)

how these men had happened to get there so soon in this pueblo that had been closed down for the night. He could only guess that the man he had left trussed up had regained consciousness, and raised a racket by kicking with his shackled boots at the side of the house until he had raised the alarm and been freed.

"Don't crowd me, gents!" he shouted. "First man who tries for me buys himself a couple of slugs through the belt buckle. I won't go out without company!"

And the semi-circle ceased the in-creeping movement.

Then the kitchen door swung open. He side-stepped quickly, and a swift flick of his eyes showed him gray-haired "Mom" Haslin, the boarding house keeper in a wrapper, fire in her eyes and a rolling pin clutched in one hand.



"Get him!" she cried shrilly. "Jump him—you lily-livered excuses for men! Ain't you got no red blood in your veins? Him and a pardner tried to rob Ab Pencer upstairs. One of 'em's dead up there now!"

"Pardon my interrupting, ma'am," the Masked Rider cut in, "but I saved Pencer from getting robbed! I followed the robbers—jumped them."

"Don't try to put no windy over on us, Masked Rider!" she screamed. "We know you—and for the sidewinder you are! We know all about your raiding and murderin' over in the Swellfork Country!"

"I've never set foot in this part of the country before," the Masked Rider declared. "Nor around Swellfork and the El Toro Negro range! Bring Ab Pencer down here! He'll tell you what really happened. Get him!"

A paunchy man with his nightshirt hurriedly tucked inside his britches growled:

"Bring Pencer down, Mom."

"The Masked Rider usually rides with his Bunch," another man said and looked about nervously.

The masked man was somewhat bewildered. Apparently he was an infamous character in this country. And he had never come this way before. Besides, he'd never had a "Bunch," never ridden the trails with anybody but the Yaqui, Blue Hawk, the only man who knew that the Masked Rider and the wandering cowboy, Wayne Morgan, were one and the same.

"We know he's the Masked Rider, anyways," another man growled. "We'd ought to take him prisoner for that alone."

"Step right up!" the masked man invited grimly.

Then Mom Haslin reappeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Pencer's gone—clean disappeared!" she told them. "Lit a shuck, seems like."

"Well, this hombre's the Masked Rider, anyways!" the growling man repeated. "What more do we need to know, dang it? What I say is we should—"

A shout came from a clump of scrawny cottonwoods behind one of the stores facing on the main street. There was a thrashing around in the undergrowth.

"I got him! Here! Here! One of the robbers! Help me!"

The Masked Rider recognized the voice of Blue Hawk, who had been out there to halt the flight of the trio if they tried to get away. The arrival of the townsmen had interfered with any move on his part. But now he was providing a diversion to help the trapped Masked Rider.

"Who the devil's that?" a man cried. Men wheeled and legged it toward the cottonwood clump, detouring around a back fence that extended for a distance, then dropped into a little hollow.

And the Masked Rider grabbed at his opportunity. He dashed around the house. As lead followed him he stopped short, took careful aim so as to maim and not to kill, and fired. A man turning the corner fell back howling, nicked in the arm. The masked man sent another slug hornetting just past the hat of the following man. He beat a retreat pellmell into the high grass. These men had no liking for gunfighting. They were just town citizens trying to grab off a man they believed was a marauder.

THE Masked Rider, black cape sweeping out behind him, leaped around another corner racing up along the side of the building, invisible in its shadow. Out front, he turned and fired another couple of bullets over the heads of those who had again started in pursuit. They dropped flat. In plain sight in a patch of moonlight, he turned to his right, as if headed for the main street. But after a few yards, he darted across the tree-shadowed road, then moved in the opposite direction. As he ran, he whipped off the black cloak, tucking it under an arm. Nobody had emerged from the yard of the boarding house yet. They were cautious, knowing they were up against a veritable gun devil.

He reached the spot where the jet-black Midnight stood. A couple of minutes later, as the townsmen splayed out into the road before the boarding house, a horseman in a cowhand's hickory workshirt and a gray sombrero, came walking a black horse into town. He sat slouched in the kak, smoking a half-burned quirly.

"Hey, there!" a man yelled at him.

"He's riding a black hoss like the Masked Rider does!" another shouted.

The horseman lifted his head, carelessly tossing away his cigarette butt.

"And since when has it been against the law to ride a black mount in these parts?" he asked in a soft baritone."

The paunchy man who led the group jumped out in front of him.

"Who are you, mister? They's been some trouble around here, some gunnin'. And we're leery of strangers."

The man in the saddle said indolently: "Ain't there no place in these parts where a trail-weary pilgrim can get hisself some Gila spit and a place to lay his head? I been in this kak so long I got calluses."

"Who the devil are you?" again demanded the leader. "Did yuh see a tall gent bustin' the breeze up the way you come, a feller in a black cloak?"

"Answerin' the second question first, no. I saw nobody ridin' the other way. And as for who I am, I'm Wayne Morgan, cowhand. Ridin' the grubline."

"Hey, somebody just ducked in there by the butcher shop!" one of the men cried. They swarmed up that way.

Morgan rode on down the street. Gunshots came from back in the lane as he reached the edge of town. There he swung Midnight into a run. It was only in such an extremity as this that he ever rode the black stallion as Wayne Morgan, and wanted to get him out of sight. He rode swiftly toward the camp, finally pausing to give the weird, wailing mountain lion signal. The Yaqui repeated it from the camp in the brush.

Wayne Morgan moved in to find Blue Hawk with a prisoner, his knife against the man's back. The prisoner was Ab Pencer, hastily dressed, his shirt tail hanging out, his coat over his arm.

"He was taking one of our mounts, Senor," Hawk said.

"Not *stealin'* it, though," Pencer quavered, pointing to a small rock. It pinned down a pile of greenbacks. "They's seventy dollars there as payment." He peered at Morgan appealingly. "Some men tried to kill me back at the boardin' house. If I went to the livery barn for my own hoss, they might try again. I've got to get away fast!" He was shaking. "I'll leave the hoss at the stable for yuh in Swellfork. Keep the *dinero*. Tell me yore name so's I can tell 'em to turn the hoss over to yuh, mister."

"Wayne Morgan," the cowboy told him. He picked up the money from under the rock and pushed it at Pencer. "We ain't in the horse-sellin' business, mister. Take the pony—and your dinero."

Pencer stared at the money, then finally took it, mumbling his thanks. A few moments later, astride one of the spare ponies, he spurred off down the creek bottom without another word.

Blue Hawk shook his head. "We may never see that horse again, Senor."

Morgan was unsaddling the black stallion, shifting the kak to the hammerhead roan he forked when riding as the wandering cowboy.

"Hawk," he answered, "when yuh suspect a gent of bein' a crook, and crave to hang the deadwood on him, it's a heap easier when he thinks yuh're his friend."

He had dropped back into the familiar Western drawl he preferred in his cowboy role. As the Masked Rider he used an entirely different tone of voice, different diction. It was then that this masked avenger—whoever he was—showed that he was a well-educated man. At other times he was the typical careless, cheerful puncher of the Western plains he loved.

Blue Hawk nodded as both mounted and got the little cavvy lined up.

Although Blue Hawk made it a career to follow and serve Wayne Morgan, even the Yaqui did not know the man's true identity. He never asked. That was a secret in the heart of the Robin Hood outlaw of the West, the secret of his buried past.

Outlaw they called him, and he could not refute it, although his only desire was to champion the downtrodden. All too often he had been accused of crimes committed by owlhoots who had capitalized on the Masked Rider's fame. Now it was too late to face such charges down—and a price was on his head. He was the prey of bounty hunters—but he knew that there were more who blessed his name, including honest lawmen, than sought to deliver him to a hangman's noose.

Blue Hawk glanced over at him.

"To Swellfork, Senor?" he asked.

Morgan nodded as he picked up the reins. "Yes, Hawk. I aim to look into some trouble on the El Toro range. And I'm a heap interested in an hombre there who's masquerading as the Masked Rider."

NEXT ISSUE

THE OUTLAW SHERIFF

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER III

Threatened Range

EARLY the next day, Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui companion were on the outskirts of the big sprawling cowtown of Swellfork. They looked down on it as the first rays of the sun spiked over the crags in the east. Then they made camp in a strip of mesquite to catch a few hours of shut-eye. But, Morgan did some deep thinking before closing his eyes.

It had been a couple of hundred miles to the southwest that he first had picked up the story of what was doing on the El Toro Negro range. It had been in a salty little pueblo as hot as an oven. He had ridden up to a blacksmith's in time to overhear a grim-faced man arguing gently with his wife. She sat on the box of a Conastoga wagon with a broken rear axle. All their houshold belongings were loaded on the wagon, bulging out over the tailboard.

"But my mother gave me that chest of drawers, Eben," the woman was protesting in a tight, strained voice. "I can't sell it. We been selling things all the way along."

The man, gray-haired and wiry, with work-gnarled hands, had shrugged discouragedly.

"Can't be helped, Ella. We *gotta* git that axle fixed to get through to my brother's place."

Morgan had eased over, had begun talking off-handedly to the man. And the poor fellow, broken by misfortune, desperate, had forgotten pride and sheepishly mumbled his story in snatches. The man—he said his name was Jenks—had owned a little cow outfit outside of Swellfork on the El Toro Negro range. A band of raiders known as the Black Bunch had struck at him. They had burned his winter hay, stacked just after cutting, burning down half his barn in the job. Jenks had gone to the bank to borrow, but Big Jim Danners, president of the bank, had turned him down, explaining that the bank had too much paper already.

"So I had to go to this Ab Pencer of the Box P," Jenks had explained.

Pencer had inherited a big chunk of *dinero* from an uncle back East, and he had been doing quite some business since, charging less interest than the bank but always insisting on short-term notes. But after that, the Black Bunch had struck with a vengeance. In telling about it, Eben Jenks had waved clenched hands at the blue heavens.

"Cuss that Masked Rider!" he had burst out. "If ever . . . Who is *he,* yuh say? Why, he's the leader of that Black Bunch!"

The cowman had gone on to tell how they had struck a second time, running half his stock off a precipice, stuff he'd had ready to ship to market. There had been no question of their rustling his stock. It had been ruthless destruction. Pencer had given him an extra week, then foreclosed.

"Can't kick about him though," Jenks had sighed helplessly. "He always gives extra time."

"Always?" Morgan had queried. "He must own a big chunk of range by now."

Jenks had said Pencer was known to have unloaded a lot of the rangeland to the B-J Land Syndicate. Nobody seemed to know just who was the personnel of the syndicate. Now Jenks was taking his wife and two children to his brother's place across the State line. Then he would try to find work.

Morgan had said he was taking a pasear down Swellfork way.

"I might try to look into things, Jenks."

Jenks had shaken his head, said there wasn't much one man could do. "But Big Jim Danners at the bank can give you all the information. Good-natured friendly feller, Big Jim."

Before he had ridden on, Morgan had slipped a few ten dollar bills into the man's reluctant hand.

Now, stretched out there in the mesquite, he was more determined than ever to dig to the bottom of this thing.

"I aim to cut the sign of that danged fake Masked Rider anyway," he muttered, before dozing off. . . .

A few hours later, under a blistering sun, Morgan and Blue Hawk rode down a slope into the bustling, prosperous cow-town with its new stores and two-story buildings, a few of brick. There were ornate-looking honky-tonks and big gambling places, a court-house with a spire. Rigs and buckboards and ponies were

BLUE HAWK

thick at the hitchrails. There was a sprawling new hotel, the Toro House. On a corner stood the brick Longhorn Bank and Trust Company. That was where Morgan would find "Big Jim" Danners.

MORGAN turned in at a hitchrail, giving a slight signal to Blue Hawk who rode some twenty feet behind him. Dismounted he paused to fire up a quirly, his eyes cutting around. Across the street, on the big window of a second-floor office was lettered in gold:

B-J LAND SYNDICATE

As he stood there he seemed like any wandering cowhand, the itchy-heeled breed who could never stay in one bunkhouse for long, craving to see what was on the other side of the horizon. But the man who lived under the name of Wayne Morgan—which was not his real name—could be whatever it best suited him at the moment. Drifter, working cowhand at times, horse wrangler, field hand, store clerk. He had even been a miner and a card dealer upon occasion. For it had been often necessary for the Masked Rider to play many roles.

As the Masked Rider he was a man who ignored the law when it interfered with his purpose, a man who took the law into his own hands, without benefit of badge when he found it necessary. In that way only could he fulfill his mission to correct injustice, lend a hand to the oppressed and the underdog. Across the West his name was mentioned with awe by many, and with venom around the campfires of the frustrated on the owlhoot trails.

He had a trick of appearing out of nowhere to strike furious blows on the side

of righteousness, and for the victims of injustice. Then he would vanish as suddenly and mysteriously as he had come.

Many times traps had been baited for him. Misled badge packers or those interested only because of the money his scalp could bring had tried to capture him. But few had repeated their attempts after once having a taste of those iron fists or facing the wizardry of his .45s. And always to the "little people" he was a modern Robin Hood.

Moving down the street, he entered the bank. A guard, one of three in the place, swung up beside him as he headed for the low railing. The man wore a neat black shirt with a tie of the same color, and black trousers. He let a hand drop casually to the butt of a big Patterson Colt.

"Got business here, stranger?" he asked curtly.

"Sorta. Big Jim Danners'll be the best judge of that. I rode two hundred miles to see him. His friend, Eben Jenks, sent me."

"Oh, Jenks." The guard nodded. "Shore, shore. Come over here. Big Jim's tied up right now." He led the way through a swinging door in the railing and pointed to a bench against the side of a partition. "Sit down."

Morgan did. He was scratching a match for his smoke when a fist hammered down on a desk inside the bank president's office. And a gravelly voice ground out, audible through the thin partition:

"Dang it, Danners, somethin's got to be done! And pronto! That Masked Rider hit my place again. Cut the fence and ran off a small bunch of stuff. Three of my men saw him."

"Why didn't they do something?" inquired a deep, genial voice.

"Jim Danners," the first speaker answered, "my men won't risk swappin' lead with that masked gent. They heard too much about how deadly he is. I've had three of my crew ask for their time inside the last ten days. Even if he was alone, none of 'em want to swap lead with him. But he always rides with his bunch."

"Yeah," another voice put in. "I saw 'em when they dynamited the mouth of that deadend canyon and trapped a big bunch of my stuff in there without hardly any water and danged little feed, Burns. It was the Masked Rider all right. And he had quite a bunch with him." The speaker's voice turned bitter. "By the time we got 'em out—a bunch of stuff I'd meant to market—a third of 'em was dead and the rest hide and bones. That's why I've got to go to Ab Pencer and borry, dang it."

WAYNE MORGAN was taking in every word. He heard the man called Burns reply angrily:

"That little jasper in black was alone when I saw him!"

"Little?" roared the other cowman. "By grab, Butch Burns, you must be loco. The Masked Rider is *big*—stands over six feet. Wide in the shoulders, too."

"Why, shucks, Mike Wimmel, he's a small, slim feller! Built sorta delicate like and—"

"Wait a moment, boys!" broke in the bank president's hearty voice. "Don't get at loggerheads now. We got enough trouble hereabouts. Listen to old Big Jim a moment!"

"Shore, Jim," "Butch" Burns' voice agreed. "You can put the thing over. We got to get up some kind of a special organization so when the Black Bunch strikes next time, the outfit can go out and track 'em down to their hole!"

"Butch is right—for once," agreed Wimmel.

"Now, wait!" It was that deep genial voice of Big Jim Danners again. "You men listen to me. Organizing Vigilantes or something, is going to rile up the whole country. And that's bad for business. As if things weren't bad enough now! Last thing the bank wants to do is to start a panic. . . . How about a little something to irrigate them tonsils?" There was the sound of a desk drawer being opened. "Why, we got so much paper in the vault right now that—"

The voice that Morgan recognized as

that of the man called Mike Wimmel cut in impatiently. "Shore, we know, Big Jim. But that ain't doin' anything to pertect us cowmen who get in a hole and have to go to that bloodsucker of a Pencer. I say we got to organize—"

"And it would be the worst thing you could do, Mike," Big Jim said in a friendly but firm tone. "This Masked Rider could go up in the mountains and hole up and wait till you boys figured the danger from him was over or till the organzation got saddle sore looking for him. Then he'd come out and hit again. Also it would alarm folks. And we don't want that."

The voice of the third man put in coldly, "Yuh shore are afraid of alarmin' folks, ain't yuh, Danners? In spite of the fact ranches are gettin' raided and cowmen pushed into bankruptcy and fence riders cut down and—"

"I'm ready to act, Chuck," the bank president said. "And I have acted." He paused for dramatic effect. "I'm bringing in a gun-fighting fool, a man who has hired out sometimes as a special marshal to clean up bad towns—Red Corlee of Washita!"

Morgan heard some gasps. He heard the raspy-voiced Burns say that Corlee was a son of the devil with his guns.

"But he's a wanted man in some parts," he objected. "Some folks claim he's just a plain killer."

"This is strictly between us," Big Jim Danners added, chuckling at the reaction to his announcement. "Just leave it to Corlee. He's going to join up with the Black Bunch to get the deadwood on them and find out where they hole up. Then . . . Well, gents. Things're going to be all right. We'll hand that Masked Rider a ticket to Boot Hill—unless he quits the country! Why he'll be afraid to show his face."

His last words were drowned out as there came a crackling fusillade of shots just down the street. Then some bellowing. Four or five cowmen and Big Jim Danners came stampeding out of the president's office. As Morgan whipped over the railing, he had a good look at them. He could pick out the banker easily—a big, thick-bodied man, florid, with a mane of iron-gray hair. He wore a fine suit of gray broadcloth and well-polished black boots. In the front of his fine ruffled white shirt was a diamond stickpin that vied with a locomotive headlight. His broad face with large, wide-open blue eyes, naive and twinkling, fitted with the geniality of his voice.

Morgan dashed out the front doors. Men were legging it along the street toward a little one-story store with a doctor's shingle hanging over its door.

"The Masked Rider's in town!" a man bawled. "Somebody shot at him, but he got away!"

Long-legged Wayne Morgan was in front of Doc Felkes' office with the first to reach the place where the doctor stood. Felkes was a sparrowlike little man, jaundiced-faced, shivering with fear. He had a strong whisky breath, too.

"The M-Masked Rider—he tried to kidnap me," he quavered. "He stepped into my office and told me to come along. Th-then Justin, he walked in. And the Masked Rider ran for it."

He thumbed toward Justin, a big dumb-looking goggle-eyed man, who nodded.

"But somebody must have seen the Masked Rider getting away!" cried Danners, the banker, as he arrived on the scene, panting.

ANOTHER man who was standing beside a sweated pinto shook his head.

"I was just riding in up that side road," he declared, "and I seen no Masked Rider. Nobody was in sight but a younker runnin' into town with his dog, and a girl pickin' flowers down on the creek bank."

A couple of men came running through the crowd to Big Jim Danners.

"Say, Jim," one of them panted, "we just found these in the grass in that little stand of willows where Doc's path turns!" He held out a black cape, a black shirt, and a black Stetson. "Looks like the Masked Rider's outfit to us, Jim!"

The banker held up the cloak and the

shirt. "By glory, that means the Masked Rider could still be right smack here in town!"

CHAPTER IV

Bodyguard

HAVING drifted up close without being noticed, Wayne Morgan, who had a trick of being self-effacing when the occasion demanded, sized up the black outfit. Burns and Mike Wimmel had argued about whether the Masked Rider was a small man or a big one. Now, looking over the black clothes, it seemed to Wayne Morgan that this impostor must be no more than a half-pint.

A lank sandy-haired man with eyes that spied on the world from beneath crags of brows pushed in.

"He was a small feller, mebbe under medium size, weren't he, Doc?" he asked. Morgan recognized his voice. He was "Butch" Burns.

"He was a big six-footer, Doc!" Wimmel, tall and lanky, snorted as he, too, pressed in. "Shore! Stitch my britches with barbed wire if he ain't!"

But the terror-stricken little medico wobbled his head from left to right and back again. He had been too excited to notice.

"Seems like any man holding a gun on you is right dang big," he muttered. "Reckon I need some medicine."

He stepped into his drug store, slamming the door behind him and pulling down the shade.

The crowd began to break up. But men were throwing nervous glances around. That Masked Rider, having shed his telltale black garb, could be somewhere close—probably was.

"Wonder why he wanted to kidnap old Felkes?" Big Jim Danners said as he and the group of ranchers moved back along the wooden sidewalk. "Shore scared the living daylights out of him, anyway."

Ambling along behind, Wayne Morgan had decided not to try to see Big Jim again right now. And he was wondering about Corlee, wondering if Big Jim Danners knew he was hiring a two-legged coyote.

He sighted Blue Hawk leaning against the post of a wooden awning. The Indian looked asleep on his feet. But Morgan knew he was missing nothing, certainly not the striking-looking girl who went swinging by him. She was slim, medium-sized, and her hair was like wheat in a noonday sun. There was a certain challenging swagger in her walk, and the man's hickory shirt she wore could not hide the curving outlines of her body. The flashing eyes were a defiance to the world in general.

Butch Burns detached himself from the banker's group to seize her by a wrist.

"What're you doing here in town, Marie?" he demanded.

"Do you own Swellfork too—by the terms of that new will?" she spat back at him like a she-wildcat.

"I offered yuh a thousand to get back to some of your father's relatives," Morgan heard Burns say. "Suppose yuh're workin' here in a honky tonk, huh?"

"I happen to be a waitress at Joe Ace's hash-house," she said coolly. "Now, please—"

Somehow, by her attitude, the command of her eyes, she freed herself and moved on. Burns stared after her a moment, thin-lipped mouth twisted. Morgan had seen angry men stare at a tough untamed horse that way before they grabbed up a whip.

Burns rejoined the banker and his party. Behind them, Morgan paused beside the somnolent-appearing Blue Hawk. "Follow the girl," Morgan said from the corner of his mouth as he rolled a quirly without looking the Yaqui's way. "Find out who she is—why Burns, who just spoke to her, is interested in her. I'll be waitin' across the street from the bank."

He eased on, knowing he could depend on the Indian.

Morgan had just smoked his second

quirly halfway down when the Yaqui came back along the wooden sidewalk. He stopped beside Morgan, obsequious.

"Got some tobacco for poor Injun?" he whined. He took the sack of Bull and papers Morgan shoved at him, and while he dumped the makings into a piece of paper the Yaqui spoke quickly in a low whisper. "She is, Senor, Marie Burns, Butch Burns' sister. But not a blood sister. She was adopted by Senor Burns, Butch's late father. When the father died, he left everything to his son, cutting off the girl. And Butch ordered her off the ranch. *Si, senor.*" He passed back the makin's.

"Meet me out at the camp in a little while," Morgan dropped sotto voce as he moved off.

HE PICKED up his roan from the hitchrail, then located Harrin's livery barn up a side street. He told the triple-chinned proprietor with the stomach that sloped over his belt like a sack of meal who he was and that Mr. Pencer was going to leave a pony there for him. The blubbery man scratched a balding head.

"Wayne Morgan, eh?" he said slowly. "Got a bad memory for names. Whyn't yuh plant yore pants in that chair there and lemme check up with Ab Pencer. Won't take a minute."

He called to a boy who appeared from one of the stalls, whispered something in his ear. The boy darted away. The liveryman seemed to be the talkative type.

"Shore having a heap of trouble with that Masked Rider around here," he commented to Morgan. "Reckon yuh heard."

Morgan shrugged. "I'm just a driftin' hand, lookin' for some work. Don't aim to stick my bill into no trouble."

"Yuh're smart, mister. I say the same thing. Was out at Eben Jenks' place treatin' a sick brood mare when this here Masked Rider hit there and burned his hay mows. That big devil in black, he shore had a heap of tough 'uns backin' his play."

Morgan merely nodded. But there it was again, the claim of an eye witness that this bogus Masked Rider was a big man, and that he rode with a bunch, the Black Bunch.

In just a few minutes Ab Pencer strode in.

"Howdy, Morgan," he greeted, and nodded to the liveryman. "Yeah, he's the man, Tandy. Bring out his cayuse."

He walked up to Morgan, hand extended. He was a far different person now than the half-drunken cowman Morgan had seen back at that crossroads eating place. He had bathed, been shaved, his mustache was trimmed, and his gray hair slicked down. He wore a blue suit, which though shiny with wear, was clean and neat. He looked like a mild-mannered businessman rather than the land-greedy money lender he was said to be.

When Morgan said he was in a hurry to ride on, the skinny Pencer led him into the dimness at one end of the barn.

[*Turn page*]

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"Got a little proposition for yuh, Morgan. Won't take a minute." Beyond earshot of the others, with the air redolent of new-mown hay, he took Morgan's arm. "Morgan, you're lookin' for a job. I got a real one—with fancy pay. Hundred a week, and cartridges free."

Morgan's keen blue eyes probed Ab Pencer's.

"Who yuh want killed?"

The money lender shook his head. "Nobody. I just aim to have some protection to keep anybody from killin' me. Want somebody who won't be marked as belongin' to my outfit, somebody who ain't supposed to be connected with me."

"Who wants to hand yuh a ticket to Boot Hill?"

"I don't know." Pencer's eyes shifted to stare at the feed lot through the back door. "But I'm worried. Feelin's runnin' plumb high against me."

Morgan's eyes narrowed. "And just what gives yuh the idea I could handle this job, Pencer?"

The cowman produced a stogie, bit off the end, then fitted it into his mouth carefully. "Because, Morgan," he said then, "when them sidewinders tried to rob me back there in Henryville, some jasper saved me. He jumped 'em and ran 'em off. I've kind of got an idea 'bout him."

"Mebbe he'd come to rob yuh himself."

Pencer shook his head. "Nope. Because he could've done that after runnin' 'em off. Instead, he took off after 'em. I slipped out the front way."

"Yes?"

"I never got a good look at him in that room. Too dark. But I do remember him bein' tall and flat-waisted. Like you."

Morgan shrugged. "Plenty of hombres are set up like that, Pencer."

"Uh-huh, Morgan. I know. But when yuh come into that little camp where I was goin' to borrow that hoss I remembered yuh'd been back at that crossroads place when I was rattlin' my tongue around. Sort of funny, wasn't it, that yuh should turn up in Henryville right at the time of the attempted robbery when a feller jest like you took a hand to help me?"

AGAIN Wayne Morgan shrugged. It seemed evident that Ab Pencer hadn't heard that the Masked Rider had appeared behind the Henryville boarding house last night.

"I'll play my hunch and back my bet, Morgan—or whatever yore handle is." Pencer smiled stiffly. "Hundred a week. For a little spell, anyway. Mebbe I'll be pullin' stakes from the El Toro range. Things're gettin' hotter here than the devil's cook stove."

Wayne Morgan, thinking fast, nodded, putting out his hand. "It's a deal, Pencer. I'll slope into yore place some time tonight on the quiet."

"Good!"

Pencer looked relieved as he pulled out a roll of bills big enough to have been handled with a pitchfork. He handed Morgan his first week's pay. Then he gave him instructions for getting to the Box P, and hurried out.

Tandy led out Morgan's cayuse. "Good man there, that Mr. Pencer," the livery barn owner said. "Honest as the day is long. Always pays his bills prompt and never tries to bargain on the price."

Morgan cocked an eyebrow. "I thought from what I've heard, that folks didn't have much use for Pencer."

Tandy snorted. "Some folks got as much sense as a half-weaned dogie. That talk about Pencer lendin' out *dinero* so's he could grab land—shucks! What would them fellers who gotta have *dinero* quicklike do if Ab Pencer refused 'em loans? They'd just go under that much faster and he could grab up their outfits cheap. Ain't that right?"

Morgan left, with somewhat mixed opinions. . . .

Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk took the small branch that forked off from the main trail down the El Toro Negro range to Squawman's Pass. Swellfork was about a third of the distance from the pass.

Morgan figured up what information he had acquired. Red Corlee was being brought in as a hired gunman to cope with the El Toro Negro Masked Rider. He was being hired by Big Jim Danners, the

banker. Morgan knew Corlee's breed. But, of course Danners might be unaware of what the red-headed gunman was.

Then there were the varied opinions about Ab Pencer. He was dubbed a blood sucker, a land grabber, by some. But in the opinion of Tandy, the liveryman, those ranchers would have been in trouble if Pencer hadn't extended them loans when the bank was unable to do so.

They drew up at a small stream to let their ponies drink.

"Hawk," Morgan asked his saddle pard, "do yuh think I'm wise in hirin' out to Pencer?"

"*Si*, perhaps, Senor," the Yaqui said. "Only—well, the talk is that Pencer hires the Black Bunch and this impostor who calls himself the Masked Rider."

Morgan nodded. He was puzzled by the seeming contradictions. Particularly about the physical characteristics of the range Masked Rider. The discarded black garb of the man who had tried to kidnap Doc Felkes indicated that he was no more than medium-sized. Yet Mike Wimmel insisted the bogus Masked Rider was a six-footer. And Tandy had also declared he was a big man.

How many Masked Riders were there around here, anyhow—besides himself?

"Senor!" The Yaqui had swung up abreast.

They had come to the lush bottomland of the El Toro range again. Morgan had already sighted the Box P on ahead, the freshly painted two-story house standing on a low rise. But the Yaqui was pointing to a small rise topped with a few saplings. Morgan switched his eyes to it.

Somebody afoot had stepped from the cover of the small strees. As he started down off the knoll, there was a gust of wind. A black cloak was whipped around the figure. And in the dim moonlight Morgan saw the wearer of the cloak slipping a black domino mask over the face.

"Our Masked Rider," Morgan said softly.

QUICKLY he gave instructions to Blue Hawk. As Morgan rode on, the Yaqui led the cavvy into a little draw, then started on foot after Morgan who cut off through the belly-high grass to his left, thankful that now the moon had been dimmed out by a lacy drift of clouds. He kept moving toward the ranchhouse. When he was a little hehind it, he dropped off, leaving the roan ground-hitched. And as he moved in closer, he saw the figure in the black cloak slipping toward the back of the place. Morgan watched from around the corner of a shed.

The bogus Masked Rider moved to the back door, disappeared inside it. In the cow country no one ever bothered locking doors. Morgan ran lightly toward the door as he heard the latch click. He didn't have to worry about any bunch this Masked Rider might have behind him.

He lifted the latch of the door carefully and stepped into the kitchen of Pencer's house. Light from the living room showed the bogus Masked Rider stepping into the front room behind a drawn, leveled gun.

"Don't make any false moves, Pencer!" the figure in the black cloak commanded. "And don't try to yell to your bunkhouse hands! My men have the place surrounded, Pencer. Keep your hands on the table!"

The intruder disappeared into the living room.

CHAPTER V

Morgan Earns His Pay

MORGAN eased up the hallway cautiously, one of his own .45s drawn. He didn't want to jump the pseudo Masked Rider yet. He wanted to hear what was said. Pencer's voice came, cracked, and shaky with surprise and fear.

"What yuh want, mister?"

There was something strange about the impostor's voice. The black-clad intruder spoke in a low pitched, affected tone that was little more than a loud whisper.

"Just one thing—a promise, Pencer,"

this voice said.

"If yuh want *dinero,* I ain't got any here," Pencer quavered. "Anyhow it's all a big windy 'bout me inheriting so much *dinero* from that uncle back East."

"I said I wanted only a promise, Pencer," his masked visitor cut in. "Listen carefully! If Butch Burns comes to you for a loan, refuse him. Understand? . . . Keep you hands on top of the table, mister!"

"But—why Burns hasn't asked me for a loan. I—I well-l . . ." Pencer, for some reason, seemed really scared. "Well—why?"

"Because I'm orderin' yuh to!" the small Masked Rider said. "Make Burns a loan and yuh'll have trouble on your hands, Pencer. Depend on that! The Masked Rider always keeps his word!"

"Well-l . . ."

"Swear yuh won't lend Burns any money, Pencer!"

"And why shouldn't he?" Morgan stepped into the room. As the figure in black started to swing, Morgan jabbed his gun nose hard enough against the masquerader's back. "Drop yore hardware on the floor, mister!" he commanded. "I got a plumb proddy trigger finger. Or mebbe yuh'd like to call in yore bunch." He spoke sarcastically, knowing no bunch was outside.

There was a deep sigh from the little Masked Rider. The gun clattered to the floor. The hands came up to shoulder height at Morgan's order. The cowboy pointed to a straight-backed chair against the wall beneath a wolfskin pegged above it. The impostor walked over slowly and sat down. Pencer started to speak but Morgan signaled him to be silent. He didn't want it known that he was in Pencer's employ.

"You're not the Masked Rider," he sternly accused the black-clad one sitting stiffly in the chair. "It just happens I know the real one."

"Nobody knows the Masked Rider!" the answer came back testily. "Nobody knows who I am, either." Morgan noted that a black bandanna was tied around the head beneath the black sombrero. "Give me a gun and let's shoot it out! You'll find out whether or not I'm the Masked Rider."

Morgan was watching the gloved hands. Suddenly he knew something. "I only swap lead with my equals," he drawled as he drew a sack of Durham from his pocket. "Mebbe yuh'd like a smoke, feller."

He flipped it over, low, aimed at the impostor's knees. The bogus Masked Rider caught it but not by using hands. The black-clad legs spread to make a lap of the black cloak. The sack landed on it. And Morgan gestured with his gun.

"Let's not waste any more time, feller," he said. "You and I are steppin' outside. Mebbe we'll have that little gun duel yuh asked for."

The eyes of the figure in black peered at him through the slits of the domino mask with a mixture of surprise and fear, but rose to precede him out of the room. Pencer came out of his chair.

"I'll get my men out and—"

"Yuh'll squat right there—or get a bullet in yore brisket," Morgan told him sternly. Sotto voce, he added, "Let me play this my way, Pencer."

Then he moved quickly out into the hall to prod the "Masked Rider" toward the back door.

Outside the masquerader swung around to face Morgan.

"All right! What do you intend to do with me?"

Morgan smiled slightly. "Why don't yuh call for yore men? I could call for mine. But"—he raised his voice deliberately, having caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure out in the shadows that he knew was Blue Hawk—"I wouldn't want anything to interfere with such a moment."

"Nobody ever whips the Masked Rider in the end, mister," the impostor said, holding the cloak close.

"And lots of folks claim the Masked Rider needs a good floggin'," Morgan came back. "Now is as good a time as any, I reckon. Yuh want to get rid of that cloak and shirt yoreself, or do I have to rip 'em off yuh?"

THERE was a gasp. And Wayne Morgan chuckled.

"Yes, it would be right embarrassin', ma'am, wouldn't it?" he said. "Who'd ever have guessed the Masked Rider was a woman?" He chuckled as he let his gun droop.

"How—how did you know?" the undisguised voice of a girl in the black garb asked.

"Guessed it. When I threw yuh the sack of makin's, I knew. You caught it in your lap, in the cloak. A man would have caught it in his hand. But you—"

He stepped in close, whipped off the black sombrero, then the black bandanna. Wheat-colored hair fell about her shoulders.

It was Marie Burns!

She stepped back. And the little barrel of a derringer in her hand gleamed under the moon. She had slipped it from under the cloak.

"One move, and you'll be—" she began.

He bowed mockingly. "The name, ma'am, is Morgan."

"Don't move, Morgan!" she blazed at him. "This derringer can knock over a bull at ten feet. You are the only person, now, who knows who the Masked Rider really is."

"That's correct, ma'am," Morgan agreed.

"Unbuckle your gun-belt and let it drop," she ordered.

Morgan obeyed. With her free hand she motioned toward the corral as she drew a .32.

"Walk down there!" she ordered. "And don't look back!"

Morgan shrugged. This game was going exactly as he wanted it to go. He started down toward the corral. He heard running steps and looked over his shoulder—just in time to see Marie Burns darting past a shed into the high grass. He intended to let her escape, temporarily. He gave the wailing cry of the mountain lion, low. It was answered by Blue Hawk off to his left.

Morgan cut over that way. A bullet rode high over his head. He didn't even bother to duck. He knew that girl Masked Rider never meant to hit him. The Yaqui stepped out of a clump of brush.

"She is heading north on her horse, Senor," he said.

Morgan nodded as he moved over toward where he had left his own roan.

"All right. I'll follow her, Hawk. You stay here and keep an eye on Pencer."

He was thinking of how scared Ab Pencer had been when caught by the supposed Mask Rider. And yet the Masked Rider and the Black Bunch were supposed to be in the hire of Ab Pencer.

Morgan had got into the saddle and on the far side of the knoll picked up her pony tracks. A few minutes later he saw her silhouetted in the moonlight as she crossed a rise. It was easy to keep her in sight after that.

He had deliberately let her get the jump on him. But he didn't believe she was the Masked Rider who was terrifying the El Toro range. He could have made her talk, but figured it best to find out where she went.

They passed the crossroads that led into Swellfork. She was pushing north. Morgan was surprised she didn't go into town.

Morgan made out the main house and outbuildings of what he knew to be Butch Burns' Running B. The girl was riding faster now as if getting close to her destination. She went over a rise. Morgan followed her, then reined in quickly as he saw her swerve into a clump of cottonwoods. She had seen what he had! Riders ahead were swinging across the range. The moon, emerging from behind a cloud, showed that the big rider in the van was garbed in a black cloak, with a black sombrero and black mask. This, then, was the man who actually was terrorizing the El Toro range in the guise of the Masked Rider.

For some reason of her own the girl had merely been trying to cash in on his reputation.

He meant to find out who that man was. He would have to leave Marie Burns for the present. As swiftly as was safe he rode on to the open prairie where he could spot the riders well over to the right.

AGAIN the moon dimmed out. He came to an elbow of a creek bordered with willows. Riding along the bank he could catch glimpses of the self-called Masked Rider and his outfit, yet keep out of sight himself. A few miles of fenceline appeared. He saw a brand mark on a fence post. It was a W-in-a-Stirrup. The Black Bunch had turned sharply toward that fenceline.

He heard the splash of their horses crossing the stream. They drew up at the fence. Morgan peered out from the cover of the willows to see a big man, dismounted, at the barbed wire with a wire-cutter that gleamed under the moon. He snipped the strands, then turned back to his mount. He pushed back his sombrero to sleeve his forehead and Morgan recognized the red-headed Corlee who had tried to rob Pencer in Henryville!

Morgan also got a glimpse of the leader as the masked man twisted in the kak to speak to his men. He had pushed back his sombrero and the domino mask hung down around his neck. The moon was in full glow again. Morgan could size up the powerful square-shouldered body, the broad face, but it was a cruel-mouthed face, stamped with an iron ruthlessness. And the eyes were so light they seemed almost white and glittering in the moonlight.

"You men savvy this," Morgan heard him say in a harsh, piercing voice. "We're out to give this Wimmel jasper a chunk of hellfire! We're goin' to break his cussed heart! Any damage yuh can deal out—do it! Cut 'em down if they get in yore way . . ." He paused to wipe his mouth on his sleeve. "And if we should leave some cargo for Boot Hill behind us, so much the better. Ain't nothin' that makes a gent change his mind so fast as lookin' into the face of a dead friend or so. Understand?"

He turned his horse to lead the way through the gap in the fence and into a stand of trees.

After some moments, Morgan followed warily. He couldn't get it out of his mind that he had seen that man somewhere before. Yet he was dead certain he never had.

CHAPTER VI

One-man Rout

THE black-clad raiders crossed a hollow ahead of Wayne Morgan, went by some winter calf sheds and down a slope. In a short while, the low bunkhouse of the W-in-a-Stirrup outfit appeared. They worked closer to it. A man was weaving his way from the corral in the general direction of the bunkhouse. Probably one of the cowhands just in after a big night in town. But he hauled up short as he spotted the riders.

"Oh, hello, fellers," he said in a thick voice. "Light and split a bean and—and—"

The leader of the Black Bunch was out of his kak in a flash, striking the man across the head with a gun-barrel. The cowboy hit the dirt like a falling log. The masked devil gave him a couple of kicks and walked back to remount. Wayne Morgan shook with fury. This man who was riding under his name was as vicious as a wolf.

But he held himself in leash. It was not the time to strike yet. He would wait until they started to strike, then hit them by surprise from the rear.

They began to fan out, weapons whipped out. They meant to start an alarm, then blast at the bunkhouse hands as they stumbled out half befuddled with sleep.

Morgan worked in closer. Then, bolting the roan through the brush, he fired twice with a .45 at a man moving toward the corral to stampede the cavvy. He missed at that range, but kept driving toward the others, discarding caution. His second gun was out now and chanting its discordant death song. He was gambling on the surprise of his unexpected assault from the rear.

It did catch the raiders unawares. One of the riders howled. Another started to

throw down with a carbine he had slid from the saddle boot in preparation for the attack. Morgan triggered again. The man with the carbine twisted sideward in the kak as the lead got him in the shoulder. He swung his cayuse past the corner of the bunkhouse.

And then Fate took a hand against Wayne Morgan, the genuine and much maligned Masked Rider. Charging through the high grass, his roan struck a discarded wagon wheel. The animal tripped and went to its knees. Morgan threw himself free, landed rolling in the grass that masked him for a few moments. Bullets droned over him. He came to his knees, cocking his guns to which he had clung.

Somebody was firing from the main house now. And the bunkhouse crew had been roused, but they didn't come bolting out blindly. Morgan saw the masquerading masked man driving toward him, eager to cut him down where he crouched. Morgan took careful aim and triggered.

The big heavy-bodied man was half-lifted out of the saddle, hit in the body. He slouched sideward and pitched to the ground. Morgan leaped forward to unmask him, but two more riders spurred up, firing fast. Again Morgan dropped to a knee, riding the triggers of his hot bucking weapons. His right hand gun clicked empty. And the next moment the left-hand gun didn't have a loaded shell in it, either. Crouched low in the grass he reloaded with deft fast fingers.

The bunkhouse crew got in on the play then, laying down a leaden barrage from the partially opened door. The surprise attack had failed. Two riders hit the ground and helped the wounded leader into saddle. He sagged over the saddle-horn. But a rider got an arm over his shoulders to support him, and when Wayne Morgan straightened with reloaded weapons the Black Bunch, ringed around the wounded leader, were racing past the corral as if the devil rode their coat tails. They slammed out the ranch-yard gate and southward along the trail.

Knowing his short-guns at that range would be worthless, Morgan caught his roan and hit the leather. He bolted after the fleeing raiders as they went over a hump in the trail. Then Morgan discovered he would never catch them that night. For his roan was limping. A fore-leg had been injured in that fall. Mouth bitter, he turned back.

To his surprise, he had met no riders in pursuit from the W-in-a-Stirrup by the time he turned in the ranch gate. Men were around the corral, before the bunkhouse, but nobody was mounted. No cayuses were saddled for the chase. A sawed-off middle-aged man with a pot-belly encased in jeans, but naked from the waist up, came down off the porch to Morgan. He was grizzled, with a receding hairline over sharp, puckered blue eyes, and a square chin like a chunk of granite. He carried a Winchester that gleamed in the moonlight as she reached up a hand to shake with Morgan.

"Reckon I shore owe yuh a debt of gratitude, stranger," he said. "I was throwin' down on 'em from the house here when I saw what yuh did. I'm Mike Wimmel, boss of this outfit."

WIMMEL was the man Morgan had overheard telling Big Jim Danners how the Masked Rider had trapped his cows in a dead-end canyon by a dynamite blast.

"Won't yuh light, mister, and have a few drinks or some java on me?" Wimmel asked.

"Thanks," Morgan told him. "But I got to be traipsin' along." He nodded toward the corral. "Don't notice yore men takin' off after them sidewinders."

Wimmel shrugged helplessly. "That was the Masked Rider and his outfit. I could pay my men double, and they still wouldn't try to hound *him* down. Can't say as I blame 'em much. He's plumb poison, that Masked Rider. Wish that polecat had never drifted onto the El Toro range. I'd give my right arm to look at that dirty snake over a gunsight!"

"I've heard talk of there bein' two of 'em on this range," Morgan said. "How

do yuh know this was the real one?'

"He paid me a visit once before," Mike Wimmel said resignedly. "He's the real one all right. If I might ask, who are you, stranger? And how did you happen into this thing?"

Wayne Morgan started to build a tube of Durham, thinking.

"The handle is Morgan," he said quietly. "Just passin' along by that creek outside yore fence and saw those gents cuttin' the wire. So I took a notion to see what they were up to."

It was the height of understatement, but the answer seemed to satisfy the rancher.

They had a few more words and Morgan left, holding the roan to a walk to spare its injured leg.

He bedded down on the open range, but before he closed his eyes, he wondered some more about whose side Red Corlee was playing on.

And a lot more about the motives of the girl, Marie. . . .

The next morning, after the regular breakfast hour, Wayne Morgan walked into Joe Ace's place in Swellfork. There was only one customer, a white-bearded old-timer in the back. Morgan sat down at a table in the middle of the room, head bent over the menu when Marie came out of the kitchen.

"Java—and make shore it's hot," he said.

In a few moments she was back with it. Pulling off his sombrero, he looked her full in the face.

"Wouldn't the lady Masked Rider like to sit down and pow-wow for a few moments?" he asked.

She spilled the coffee on the checkered cloth in surprise as she suddenly recognized him.

"How did you know I'd be here?" she blurted.

"A man picks up information," he parried. "And mebbe, Miss Burns, he knows things to start with. Like you not bein' the Masked Rider. Would yuh care to sit down?"

She hesitated, then pulled out the chair across the table and seated herself, tossing back her light hair nervously.

"How do you know I'm not the Masked Rider?" she demanded.

"I told yuh that before," he answered. "It's because I know the real Masked Rider very well."

"You mean the leader of the Black Bunch?"

Morgan shook is head. "No. I said the *real* one. And I know where I can reach him. If you want to give it to me straight, mebbe I can help yuh. Of course, on the other hand, I can always turn you over to the law."

She bridled, eyes narrowing. "The law? What kind of law is there in Swellfork? You have no real evidence on me anyway. Why, you can't prove a thing, Mr. Morgan!" Her voice rose.

"Suppose yuh tell me," Morgan countered. "About the law."

She did. She said there was a town marshal named Siderman who half the time was laid up with rheumatism. He had made a few half-hearted attempts to

WAYNE MORGAN DONS A STAR

WHEN the masked avenger rides into Splitrock to obtain supplies, he arrives just in time to take part in a mad chase after a band of raiders —during which the law officer of the town is bushwhacked. By a strange irony, Morgan is sworn in as the new sheriff—and so, though himself a wanted man with a price on his head, he assumes arduous duties as a recognized star-toter. This leads to stirring battles and narrow escapes for Morgan in THE OUTLAW SHERIFF, a novel sizzling with six-shooter surprises from start to finish! Look forward to this newest and best adventure of the Masked Rider next issue!

catch up with the Black Bunch, but was completely ineffectual.

"And why are *you* posin' as the Masked Rider?" Morgan asked gently. "Why did yuh try to kidnap Doc Felkes? And remember—I can still have yuh jailed for enterin' Pencer's house last night and threatenin' him with a gun, ma'am."

Her eyes swerved away for a few seconds.

Then she began to talk softly, in a voice so low it was little above a whisper.

"Because I was robbed, Mr. Morgan. Of course I was only Simon Burns' adopted daughter, but he adopted me legally. He was wonderful to me, treated me exactly as if I were his own flesh and blood. I tried to be a real daughter to him, but Butch, his own son, he—" She broke off.

"Yes?" Morgan encouraged.

HE HOPED to find out something that would give him a clue to this masked man who had the whole range living in fear. He had wounded the fellow last night. It was a good bet he wouldn't ride again for a spell. And there was another angle. Ab Pencer, apparently, had not been a victim of the range's Masked Rider. Why?

"About Butch?" he reminded.

"Well," Marie Burns went on, "he gave his dad plenty of trouble with his gambling and drinking. He had Simon half crazy at times." She shook her head sadly. "There was a sudden death-bed will," she said. "Apparently there was, anyway. Simon had always told me that he was leaving me a controlling interest in the outfit so that I could keep it together, that he didn't trust Butch to run things. Then, this night he—died, Doc Felkes, Butch, and a foreman named Galt were the only people in the room with him. Galt has disappeared. After father was gone, Butch came downstairs and told me there was a new will." Her voice broke and she bowed her head.

"I never wanted anything," she said, after a moment. "Simon had always been so wonderful to me. But he was a man who kept his word. When I saw that second will I knew something was wrong. It gave the whole outfit to Butch. And he told me to get off the ranch. That—that is why I'm here, working in town, now. That's why I became the Masked Rider—to raid Butch Burns' spread."

"Why?" Morgan asked coldly.

"To scare him! He knows he's robbed me. I've sent him notes signed, 'the Masked Rider,' warning him that until he turns honest he'll have trouble. That last will was a fake. Simon Burns was dying and they got him to sign something—if one of *them* didn't sign it. Dr. Felkes and Galt were the witnesses."

"I see," said Morgan as he sipped more coffee.

"That was why I tried to kidnap Doc," she said defiantly. "I—I thought perhaps I could make him admit that will was forged. When that failed, I went to Pencer's place to try to make him promise not to lend Butch any money." She shook her head wearily. "I thought I had Butch on the run . . . But, I don't know."

ON A BORDER BANDIT TRAIL!

THE OUTLAW SHERIFF

A Complete Masked Rider Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

COMING NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER VII

Suspicion in High Places

WAYNE MORGAN admired the girl for her courage in trying to fight back, for trying to regain what she thought she had been cheated out of by Butch Burns. Instinctively he put his hand across the table, over one of her twitching ones.

"Pretty brave," he murmured. "But are yuh shore it was the right way? Yuh haven't seemed to get far—Miss Masked Rider."

"I—I was trying to use the Masked Rider's terrifying reputation to scare Butch," Marie admitted. "I know *nobody* here would dare buck the Masked Rider, much less Butch. I knew I was taking a chance but—well, it was a shot in the dark. I thought I might send Butch another 'Masked Rider' note telling him that if he didn't live up to the terms of the real will, he'd be wiped out. After my raids on the place, Butch might be convinced. I know it sounds loco, Mr. Morgan, but—"

"It does," he said gently. "And I want yuh to make me a promise."

She lifted rebellious eyes to his. "What?"

"I want yuh to promise me yuh won't ride as the Masked Rider any more. It's too dangerous."

A hand dropped on Wayne Morgan's shoulder.

"Gentleman around the corner who'd like to talk business with yuh, Mr. Morgan," a heavy voice said.

Morgan glimpsed the look of fear on the girl's face. He dropped a hand to a gun butt, then recognized the black-garbed guard to whom he had spoken in the bank. Behind him was another, black-clothed.

The guard smiled. "Nothin' to get upset about, Mr. Morgan. Big Jim Danners that yuh wanted to see would like to talk to yuh. . . . "

Everything was affable as Wayne Morgan sat in the banker's private office. Big Jim, in pearl gray, offered him a cigar. Morgan refused it, building himself a cigarette instead. Danners beamed good will.

"You were in to see me, Mr. Morgan," Danners said in his deep, resonant voice. "Sorry I didn't see you. Then I heard you'd ridden back into town this morning. So-o—" He drew on one of his imported cigars.

Morgan gave him a Sphinxlike smile. "Yuh seem to know everything that happens in this town, Mr. Danners."

Danners expelled a cloud of cigar smoke. "Just call me 'Big Jim.' All my friends do. As far as knowing what happens in a town—" He shrugged his heavy shoulders, a broad smile on his square, bland face. "Well, it's our business as bankers . . . What can I do for you, Mr. Morgan?"

Morgan told him about meeting Eben Jenks on the trail, said Jenks had referred him to Big Jim. Morgan hoped something might be done for the cowman. The banker tapped off some of his cigar ash into a tray.

"Yes, yes, I know. Very unfortunate case. Good honest man, Jenks. But there was nothing I could do."

"But this Masked Rider?" Morgan gave him his lead.

Big Jim Danners looked him squarely in the eye. And his own stare was steel-sheathed.

"You've been sent here to get him, Morgan?" he asked bluntly.

Wayne Morgan shrugged. "I've had a proposition like that put up to me. What do yuh think of it?"

The banker studied his cigar tip. "If I was you, Morgan, I wouldn't get mixed up in this business," he said then, soberly. "From what I gather, there are some powerful interests behind this thing. Of course, that's just a personal opinion." Big Jim leaned forward, eyes guarded, and asked: "So somebody wants to hire you to run down the Masked Rider?"

Morgan drew on his quirly indolently. "Mebbe. But why should I take a job like that when I knew where the Masked

Rider was before I ever sloped into Swellfork?"

It was a game of poker, a game of cat-and-mouse they were playing.

"You did?" Danners sat back in the desk chair. "You know where the Masked Rider—er . . . Hmmm . . . Mr Morgan, if you can hang the deadwood on that man, I want to help all I can. If there is anything—well, call on me." He rose. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd keep me informed about anything you discover."

Morgan rose too, keeping his face blank but chuckling inside. "I might have somethin' to tell yuh about the Masked Rider within a day or two," he parried Danners' remark.

BIG JIM forgot his genial manner and almost bristled. "Mr. Morgan, from certain information I have I don't think the Masked Rider will be in this part of the country long now. I don't believe you need to worry about him."

"What makes yuh think that. Mr. Danners?" Morgan asked innocently. "Although I did hear this man who is *supposed* to be the Masked Rider was bad wounded last night."

"'Suppose to be'?" Danners snapped. "Well, I don't know much about it." He puffed out a cloud of cigar smoke. "Except for your own good—and safety—I'd suggest you let us here in the El Toro country handle our own problems. You witnessed that trouble out at the Wimmel place last night."

"How did you know I was out there last night, Mr. Danners?" Morgan shot out. "I don't think Wimmel or any of his crew have hit town yet this morning."

Big Jim's jaw sagged, and he puffed hard on his cigar. Then with his air of geniality back he put out his hand.

"Glad you dropped in, Mr. Morgan," he said. "And if there is anything I can do for you, just drop in again. But—" and a note of steel came into his voice—"the Masked Rider might be a tougher proposition than you think."

Morgan nodded. "I kind of agree with yuh, Mr. Danners. He might be tougher than *you* think, too."

He slapped on his sombrero and strode out.

At the livery barn he picked up the roan. The rest had fixed up its slightly lamed leg all right. The fat livery man had rubbed the mount with what he called his "special liniment." Morgan led the horse along a back lane to the rear of Joe Ace's place. As he walked across the backyard Marie swung open the screen door of the kitchen as if she'd been waiting for him.

"You're all right?" she asked anxiously. When he nodded, she put a hand on his shoulder.

"I was worried. A breed and another man came in after you left. The breed spoke Spanish thinking, I suppose, that I couldn't understand it. He said the head man knew who shot up the Masked Rider last night. That it was you!"

Morgan shrugged, though he knew that meant that somewhere now he had an avowed enemy who'd exact his vengeance sooner or later, if possible. Somebody called from inside and Marie darted away.

Wayne Morgan rode out of town, making sure he wasn't being trailed. Beyond Swellfork, he came to the branching road leading to Pencer's place, and followed it. At the little draw where Blue Hawk had left the cavvy, he turned in. The Yaqui Indian glided out of the brush.

"Senor, I was worried when you did not return," he said.

"Had a little brush, Blue Hawk," Morgan told him. "Then I paid a visit to town this mornin'."

Blue Hawk had information of his own.

"Another Masked Rider came here last night," he said. "A big man like yourself, senor. He was badly shot up. They were holding him in the saddle."

Morgan knew who Hawk meant, the man he himself had wounded. But he was still surprised.

"Came here?" he repeated.

"To Pencer's place, there." Blue Hawk pointed.

"He went in?"

"*Si*, Senor. But they took him away in

a wagon early today, after the doctor came out from town. The little bald man."

Morgan had dropped from the kak. He stood there building a quirly, thinking hard. He had tracked down one of the fake Masked Riders—Marie Burns—knew her reasons for her masquerade. He had tangled with the other bogus Masked Rider last night. But this looked as if Ab Pencer were involved. Yet Pencer had hired Wayne Morgan to protect him from this range masked man. Morgan asked Hawk another question.

"Was the doctor here when this Masked Rider left?"

Blue Hawk shook his head. "No, Senor. The doctor had already left."

"Hawk," Morgan said softly, "I think it's time the real Masked Rider rode again. We'll have business to do tonight. . . . "

It was well after suppertime that night, nearing ten, and long since full dark when the wail of the mountain lion came faintly to the draw where the cavvy was sheltered. Morgan heard it and knew Blue Hawk was coming up the trail.

WAYNE MORGAN was ready. Only now he was the Masked Rider, garbed in black cloak and domino mask. His great black stallion, Midnight, was saddled and waiting.

He had sent Blue Hawk into town, bearing a fictitious message from Pencer to Doc Felkes to come at once. There was the creak of wheels. Doc Felkes' buggy came around the turn, followed by Blue Hawk who evidently had convinced Doc that the man who needed him was the outlaw he had patched up earlier.

The Masked Rider slipped out and followed them, leading Midnight.

As the first two reached the ranch gate, the Yaqui said:

"Go right on in, Doc!"

Then Hawk cut aside and between two cut banks dropped out of sight. Meanwhile Felkes clambered down from the buggy and started up the steps. The door opened, to reveal Ab Pencer in undershirt and pants.

"Howdy, Doc," he called. "What brings you out here?"

"Well, you sent for me. Is he worse, that Joe?"

"Something's dang wrong, Doc. Dangerous! Come in quick." The door was slammed shut.

The Masked Rider swooped across the road and into the high uncut grass of the ranchyard. He made the porch unseen. He eased open the unlocked door but the two talking excitedly in the front room in low voices never heard it. But then the Masked Rider half-tripped over a piece of carpet and his spur chains rattled loudly.

"Somebody's out there!" Pencer cried.

The Masked Rider leaped into the front room like a great black hawk, eyes coldly fierce through the slits of the domino mask. His two .45s were spiked before him. Felkes never moved from his chair, just stared. But Ab Pencer made a grab for a bone-handled Colts on the table beside the lamp with a flower-painted shade.

"Touch it, and you'll find yourself in a six-foot pine box, Pencer!" the Masked Rider said.

But he was wondering. If Pencer had hired the bogus Masked Rider, why did he fear him now?

"Man alive!" Doc Felkes said, peering at him closely. "How can you be on your feet after the way you were shot up?"

"I am the *real* Masked Rider," the man in black came back coldly. "Sit down, Pencer! And make one yell for your men and it'll be all over. My outfit is ready outside." He meant Blue Hawk, of course.

"What yuh want?" Pencer asked in a shaky voice.

"I'm here to find out who this so-called Masked Rider around here is—and where he holes up. I'll find out if I have to gunwhip both of you." He indicated Doc with a gun sight.

"You first! Talk!"

NEXT WEEK

GUNSMOKE ON THE RANGE

An Exciting Novelet

By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

AND OTHER NOVELETS AND STORIES

CHAPTER VIII

A Cat's-paw Talks

FELKES rose. A strange dignity and determination showed in the little doctor's sallow face. He shook his head.

"No," he said simply.

The Masked Rider hated to do it. He holstered his left-hand gun. The little older man was no match for him. But the fate of a cow country was at stake. His left hand shot out. The long powerful fingers clamped around the Doc's scrawny neck, tightened. Tightened until Doc Felkes' eyes began to bulge. His face took on an apoplectic hue. Only the Masked Rider's powerful arm kept him from buckling at the knees.

The man in black relaxed his grip a moment. "Ready to talk now, Felkes?"

The Doc shook his head. The Masked Rider let him drop back into the chair. Felkes lay in it, panting weakly and fingering his throat. The Masked Rider gave him half a minute. Then he snapped the muzzle of his right-hand gun sharply against the side of his skull, cocked the weapon.

"Talk!"

Again Felkes shook his head. "Go ahead—pull the trigger," he got out in a whisper. "It'd be better for me that way. They'd do terrible things to me if they found out I talked—and they always find you. Always. Then they'd kill me! Fire away."

"Who are 'they'?" the Masked Rider demanded.

But again the Doc shook his head. And the Masked Rider knew he was going to get nothing from this little man who preferred to die rather than to talk. The Masked Rider motioned to Pencer.

"All right," he said gruffly, "it's going to be one or the other of you. And I'm sick of waiting." He cracked Pencer lightly on the side of the head with his gun barrel. Hard enough to give him the idea. "You better talk, Pencer. I know this fake Masked Rider came in here last night—wounded, in the bargain."

Ab Pencer's jaw dropped. "Yuh're loco, mister. I don't know who this is yuh keep—"

"Stop lying!" the Masked Rider told him sternly. "He was here. The Doc came out. After he left, this impostor was so badly wounded his men took him off in one of your ranch wagons. So?"

"All right," Pencer surrendered. "That's true. But I don't know who he is."

"That's a windy, Pencer! People say you pay him to attack ranchers on whose property you hold mortgages, to drive them out so you can foreclose. And you'd sure like Wimmel's outfit, wouldn't you? There was an attempt to raid his place last night to hurry him up in coming to you for *dinero*. That's where this fake Masked Rider got shot. And you sent him out on that job!"

Pencer shrugged wearily, spreading his hands. "I never sent them there. I don't pay or hire this or any other Masked Rider. I guessed it was him they toted in here last night. But I don't know who he is."

"He doesn't—that's right," Doc Felkes put in. "I can swear to that. He—he's just a tool."

"For whom? Tell me!"

And then the mountain lion call, the signal from Blue Hawk, came from outside in the night. It was a warning of danger. But the Masked Rider chose to take the risk of another few moments in the hope of getting information. After all, the bogus Masked Rider would not be riding for a while, not with that body wound he had.

The Masked Rider turned back to Pencer. He was close to the key of the setup, and he had to find it.

"You don't hire this other Masked Rider," he accused. "You don't know who he is. Yet, when he's wounded, they bring him right over to your place! That doesn't make sense, man."

Pencer shook his head helplessly. "They did it, that's all. What could I do against all them guns? They jumped me—just

like you have."

"All right," the Masked Rider said. "Where's your headpiece, Pencer? We're taking a little *pasear,* friend."

Pencer grew paler. "Where? Why? I can't go now!"

"This thing in my hand is no pea-shooter, Pencer. It says you're coming along. *Sabe?* I want you to meet some of my boys. They have some nice ways of making a man loosen up his tongue. Get your hat!"

Pencer sagged back against the table, a man beset on at least two sides as the Masked Rider knew from what Pencer had said when he hired Wayne Morgan for protection. But he had to be stern, even harsh, if he was to get to the bottom of the trouble in the El Toro Negro country.

PENCER began to talk, slowly, in a low, monotonous voice.

"I didn't hire the Black Bunch. I know what they're doin'—and it involves me and the *dinero* I'm supposed to loan out."

" 'Supposed'?" the Masked Rider picked him up.

"I'll explain that," Pencer went on, staring at the floor with dull eyes. "Mebbe yuh've heard about that *dinero* I inherited from an uncle back East. The story was it was a big chunk. Actually it was only a mite over two thousand. I—I put it in the bank. Then this—this gent told me how I could make more'n the bank would give me in interest. He said the bank was tied up with a heap of paper, notes and mortgages. He—"

The Masked Rider was about to break in and demand to know who that "gent" was, but decided to let Pencer go on uninterrupted.

"—said he knew a rancher who needed a loan bad," Pencer continued. "That he'd send him to me, and I was to give him low interest but on a short term note. I did. Then his ranch was raided by this Masked Rider and his Black Bunch and his buildin's burnt to the ground."

Pencer paused to clear his throat. "I didn't want to jump on the poor devil. But the bank held an old note of his. They cracked down so I had to pick up the place at the foreclosure sale. Then another small rancher, turned down by the bank, came to me for a loan. And the Black Bunch hit him, kept running off his cow stuff till he went broke. I had to foreclose to get my *dinero* back. By then, I began to see plainer, and I wanted to get out." He mopped at the sweat on his forehead with a red bandanna.

The cry of the mountain lion came again, faintly, from outside. But the Masked Rider still had to stay a little longer.

"But that gent, he wouldn't let me. He advances me the money to make the loans. He swore I was tied into the thing now, that if I bucked he'd swear I hired that Masked Rider and his outfit. So-o—" He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Now they're poundin' at Wimmel to drive him to me for a loan. And it'll be the same old story. That's the honest truth, I swear."

The Masked Rider could see through a man, could tell what was going on behind his face. And he knew Pencer, in a cold sweat about what would happen to him if he was taken prisoner, was telling the truth.

"You must own or control a lot of land by now, Pencer," he said drily.

Pencer shook his head. "No. That new B-J Land Syndicate in town takes it off my hands, giving me a tidy little profit. They moved in right after I made my first loan."

"Who's this gent who came to you first, who won't let you get out?" the Masked Rider demanded. "If you're on the square, you'll tell me."

Ab Pencer went a greenish shade, one trembling hand clawing at the side of the table for support. It trembled so his fingers kept slipping off. He, like the Doc, was in deathly fear of the key man in this play.

Pencer opened his mouth to speak—but he never got any further. The Masked Rider had waited too long after Hawk's signal. He caught the slight creak of one of the door hinges, spun with his one

drawn gun whipping up.

It was to face another Masked Rider!

Two gunmen flanked him. One was a short man with a patch over the left eye. The other was a husky. They were garbed entirely in black, too, and with black masks.

The masquerader stood stunned at the sight of the Masked Rider who flung around to face him, too amazed for a moment to trigger.

"Hoist 'em, jasper!" the man with the right to the name of Masked Rider barked.

The next moment he knew he should have fired first and talked afterward. But he was amazed that this man should be on his feet after the lead that had been put in him last night. Evidently he hadn't been wounded as seriously as had been thought.

And then a shot came through the window behind him. It ripped cleanly through the flesh of the Masked Rider's left arm, half-twisted him around. And it also made it impossible for him to get his left-hand weapon redrawn with a numbed arm.

From outside came a strangled cry. The man who had shot from the outside plunged against the window pane, smashing it. He fell forward, eyes rolling upward in death. That was the handiwork of Blue Hawk with his silent knife.

INSIDE, the black-garbed imitator let go at the Masked Rider, hitting the trigger twice. But he was facing a trained gunfighter. Even though surprised, though slightly wounded, the Masked Rider whipped sideward a breath ahead of the shots. They missed him. Then he had his own gun spitting its staccato defiance. He missed his "twin" once in the dimness of the hall, but the slug got one of the gunmen in the thigh, putting him out of action. His next shot knocked one of the other masked man's guns out of his hand though. The man screeched an oath. He and the other gunslick with him slung lead wildly into the room, backing against the side wall of the hall.

The Masked Rider got the other man between the ribs. The fellow's mouth flew open. He pitched sideward, bumping against the wall. The gunman with him jumped for the front door. Painfully the Masked Rider started to dig for the weapon in his left holster to shift it to his right hand, knowing the weapon he had used must be about empty. He didn't need to be told he was in one tough spot, with the Black Bunch outside.

As he heard the boots of men on the front steps another man at the side window tried three times to get him but missed. Then the Masked Rider received a stunning blow on the back of the head. It drove him to his knees. As he twisted to defend himself he saw it was Doc Felkes who had delivered the blow.

Perhaps Felkes was simply exacting vengeance for the choking the Masked Rider had given him. On the other hand, maybe the Doc was demonstrating to the bunch that dominated the El Toro Negro range that he was not in cahoots with any enemy.

Almost in the same second, the lamp went out, shade and chimney smashed by lead. The Masked Rider was in bad shape, with one arm out of commission, temporarily at least. His head rang and swam from the blow as he struggled fiercely to maintain consciousness. If they could have got at him then, it would have been like shooting fish in a barrel.

He had to get out somehow. Even dazed as he was he remembered the door in the far back corner of that front room. If he could reach it he might be able to make a break out the kitchen door.

On hands and knees he was working past the table as more yelling came from outside.

"If those cussed cowhands try to come outa that bunkhouse, blast the gophers!" somebody bawled.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

WHELP OF THE FOX

An Action-Packed Novelet

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

AND MANY OTHER YARNS

CHAPTER IX

Bad News for the Bunch

THE Masked Rider managed to rise and stumble, fumbling in the darkness, to that far door after half-falling over a chair. He found the latch, lifted it, stepped through the door and pulled it closed. It was just as someone entering the bullet-riddled front room, struck a match. The Masked Rider eased ahead. A coat rubbed against his cheek. And then he came up against the back wall of a closet.

He was trapped, in a cul de sac!

He turned carefully, wavering on his feet from that head blow, and faced outward, toward the door. He had but one chance, and that was to blast the instant anybody opened it. Through a crack in the panel light filtered through. They had relighted the lamp. They saw then he wasn't in the room.

"Help me get the boss into a chair!" somebody said.

Then the masked man in the front room was yelling in a pain-twisted voice, demanding they get the Masked Rider. Wanting to know how in blazes he had got away.

"He didn't get out through the hall! I know that."

There was a tramping of boots. "The window!" a man yelled. "He must've gone out that way!"

"Then get outside!" the masked leader whom the Masked Rider now knew to be Red Corlee, ground out. "Scour the ground! There was no hoss outside when we came in. He was hit. He can't get far. Jerry—Mike, you two stay here with me. I'm hurt. And he might try to slip back."

In the closet, the Masked Rider heard Corlee order Felkes to take a look at his wound. The Doc said it was nothing serious, that the slug had passed clean through, no bones broken. He ordered Pencer to get some hot water and clean cloths. The Masked Rider heard a couple of groans, heard the Doc saying to take it easy.

"All right," the Doc said finally. "You won't feel so good for a few days. Be stiff and sore. Better stay in your bunk."

"Aw, shut up!" the masked boss of the Black Bunch cut in sneeringly. "Pencer, what the devil were you doin' with that feller posin' as the Masked Rider—as me! —in yore house here? Talk fast! Lie, and yuh'll draw lead. *Sabe?*"

Listening from behind the thin closet door, in danger of being discovered any moment, the Masked Rider heard Pencer, his voice strangely steady now.

"I didn't invite him here, honest," Pencer said. "I don't know who in tarnation he is. He walked in and jumped us with his guns."

"What did he want?"

Pencer swallowed hard. "He wanted to know who you were, who was behind all this raidin' and trouble on the range."

"Did you tell him anything?"

"Of course not. I don't know who he is or who you are, either."

"Yuh tell a slick story, Pencer. But if there's any slip-up, heaven help yuh! Felkes, we came here to have Pencer send a man into town to get you. The Chief's brother is worse. In terrible bad shape. So long as yuh're here, we'll take yuh back with us."

Catching every word, the Masked Rider wondered who the "Chief" was. Felkes' answer was lost in the tramp of men coming up the steps, returning from the search. The Masked Rider could hear some others entering from the rear.

"Strike a match, Slim," one of them said. "We'll take a look-see back here." They were checking on the kitchen behind the closet. "Nobody in here—that's for shore."

In the front room, one of the men was reporting to the black-clad boss.

"Nary a sign of him around, Boss."

Corlee swore and stormed, then broke off with a groan.

"He couldn't of gone up in smoke, dang it! He must of had a pony staked out somewheres near."

"No sign of any."

There was the tattoo of hoofs coming down the trail. Men sprang to the door. The horse turned into the ranchyard.

"It's Toby, Boss!" a man at the door called.

A man ran up the steps and came in panting.

"It's too late, Boss. He died a spell after yuh left."

"His brother will be crazy mad," the boss said. "Loco. He loved Joe. And the Chief's got an awful temper!" Then he told the Doc to get back to town and keep his mouth closed. "Give me an arm, boys. It's goin' to be tough ridin'."

THE Masked Rider heard them ride off. In the room, Ab Pencer strode around, talking under his breath. The Masked Rider didn't step out yet. It was a great trick of both lobo packs and posses apparently to give up the hunt, ride off, then leave a couple of men to grab the fugitive if he came out of hiding.

When he heard Pencer leave the room he finally came out. He looked out the shattered side window.

Down by the bunkhouse, Pencer was talking to some of his men. There was no chance of jumping him now.

The Masked Rider made his way out to the porch, crouched, still unsteady on his legs. There seemed nobody close around. He went down the steps and into the high grass, head throbbing fiercely. When he got across the road to the small stand of saplings, Midnight was gone. He wasn't worried, certain that Hawk had slipped the animal away before Corlee's men searched the place.

He started down the trail toward the hideout camp. In his high-heeled boots it seemed he would never get there. But he finally reached the brush-marked draw, gave the signal, and got the Yaqui's answer.

In the moonlight the Indian's face was impassive. But his dark eyes glowed with relief to see the Masked Rider free and unharmed.

"Senor!" he cried. *"Gracia Dios!* I watched them ride away and saw they had not captured you. So I came here. You—"

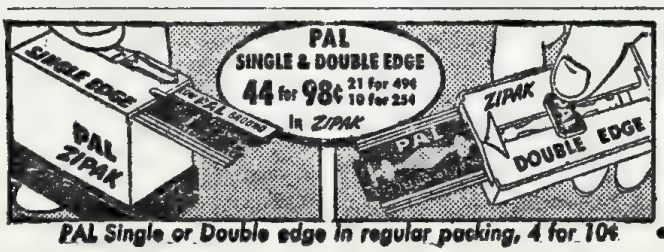
He broke off as he saw the battered, exhausted Masked Rider reel. The cloak fell back, revealing the blood-stained shirt sleeve.

The Yaqui took over at once. He got the Masked Rider seated on a boulder, gave him a drink from a canteen. Then he built a small fire that couldn't be seen from the road and boiled a pan of water. As it heated he put his knife over a flame. He washed out the flesh gash in the upper arm with a rag dipped in the hot water. Then came the cauterizing with the white-hot knife.

The Masked Rider gritted his teeth for a moment—and it was over. The Indian was bandaging up the wound with gentle hands.

"It will be very stiff, the arm, for a couple of days, Senor," he warned, inspecting the lump on the back of the

[*Turn page*]



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Masked Rider's head, then feeling his forehead. "You have a fever too. You must rest a few days. The head injury is dangerous."

The Masked Rider was slipping out of his black garb and into the habiliments of Wayne Morgan as he shook his head.

"I'll rest tonight," he promised, "but we've got to work fast, Hawk. They're warned now."

He quickly related what had happened inside the ranchhouse.

"They'll be hunting *us* now, because they know somebody has their number and is after them. I couldn't get the name of the key man out of Pencer or the Doc. If I could only back-trail—"

"The impostor, eh, Senor? But you cannot ride tonight."

Wayne Morgan's mouth hardened. "They'll be far down the trail now, out of sight. But if we could only locate their hideout—"

Hawk, tramping out the fire drew himself up with a look of hurt pride.

"Senor, Blue Hawk can follow a cold trail with ease. I will find their hideout."

"All right, Hawk. But don't get too close. Don't try to go into it. Just find *where* they have gone, then report back here."

"*Si*, Senor."

In a short time the Yaqui was riding southward on his gray mount to track down the fake Masked Rider, and the Black Bunch.

Stretched out in a blanket with his two Colts on a tree stump near at hand, Wayne Morgan prepared to catch some shut-eye in the little hidden camp. A night bird, winging low overhead, gave its cry. From some little distance up the draw, in the stillness of the range night, he caught the gurgle of the feeder creek as it passed through the Spanish bayonet stalks. Overhead, the moon was gone. But the night was bright with the light of stars like brilliant pale blue buttons sewn on the black cloth of the heavens. Morgan concentrated on them to keep awake.

He must think. First, he was convinced that Ab Pencer had not hired the Black Bunch with its impostor leader. When he, the Masked Rider, had leaped into the room, Pencer had gone for that gun like a man fearful for his life. And the bogus Masked Rider had not treated Ab Pencer as if he were being paid by him. Morgan believed Pencer's story of having been trapped into this whole vicious deal of land-grabbing.

His mind switched to Doc Felkes. Doc had been out there last night. They had intended to take him to the camp tonight to treat the now dead "Joe", the Chief's brother. So he was trusted. And he would know who the Chief was. If only he could be made to talk!

He remembered Marie and her story about the last-minute will. Felkes had been there at the time of her foster father's death. Perhaps that could be used as a lever to make the doctor talk about the Chief.

Before Morgan drowsed off, he thought of Red Corlee. Corlee had been with the Bunch tonight. It could be that he was collecting from Danners and doublecrossing him. . . .

IT WAS about noontime when Wayne Morgan rode into Swellfork, again just a run-of-the-mill wandering cowboy. He slouched lazily in the kak, wore only one gun—in sight, at least. Another .45 was in a shoulder sling. He left the roan at the livery barn and moseyed down the street as if he hadn't a care in the world. Passing a new building going up, he picked up a stick of wood. Then, on the steps of a hay and feed store that commanded a view of Doc Felkes office, he sat down and whittled like any other idler.

Once he speculated on dropping into the B-J Land Syndicate to which Pencer had said he sold the ranches he had picked up. But something told him he would learn nothing. And he would be showing his own hand too much. He was certain, however, that the key man behind this cold-decked deal and the B-J Land Syndicate had a hookup.

He didn't have long to wait in the shade of the wooden awning. In about half an

hour Doc Felkes emerged and came bustling up the street with his short-legged steps, wearing a black frock coat green with age. He went into the bank on the corner. Wayne Morgan whistled softly.

The Doc was in there quite a spell. When he came down the steps his face was red and twisting, the face of a futilely angry man. He headed for the saloon across the street. Morgan ambled along the sidewalk and glanced over the batwings. The Doc was at the bar, slugging them down fast.

When finally he emerged he walked quickly but not too steadily to his office and let himself in. A white-bearded man stepped in a few seconds after him. So Morgan had some more waiting to do. Finally the aged patient came out and went back down the street.

Rain had begun to fall in a slight drizzle. Morgan had started to cross the street when a woman with a market basket, coming along the wet planks of the sidewalk, slipped and fell. The purchases in her basket scattered into the gutter.

Morgan hurried to her and helped her to her feet. He gathered up her packages and replaced them in the basket. It took a few minutes as one of the packages had been a bag of potatoes. The bag had broken and the potatoes were scattered all around. He finally got across the street to the glass-paneled door. A sign in the upper half of the door said: "Walk In."

CHAPTER X

Trapped!

MORGAN entered the doctor's office, to find himself in a little front waiting room furnished with shabby furniture. In the rear was a door labeled "Office." He went over and knocked on it. A muffled voice said:

"Be out in a minute."

Morgan intended to bluff Felkes that he was a special State officer here to investigate the late Simon Burns will, that Marie Burns had written the State office charging that it was a fraud.

"Doc, I'm in a hurry!" he called.

There was no answer. Morgan tried the knob. The door wasn't locked. He stepped into the office. There was a battered, littered desk, a sheet-covered table on which a patient could be examined, beyond it a cabinet of instruments. Along an end wall were several shelves lined with jars of pills of assorted colors and bottles of liquids of various hues.

He didn't see Doc Felkes at first. Then, frowning, he saw boots protruding from behind one end of the desk. Morgan was around there in a flash.

Doc Felkes was stretched prone on his face, one scrawny hand wrapped around the leg of an old straight chair. There were two knife-cut rents in the back of his shiny black frock coat, the gashes framed with blood. Morgan recalled then that the voice, though muffled, that had called "Just a minute," had seemed too deep to be the little Doc's. It had been the knife killer who had answered him.

Far down the line of backyards, as Morgan glanced quickly out the window, he saw a man in black shirt and pants trotting along. Even as Morgan looked he turned into an alley between two stores.

Wayne Morgan was about to rush out to follow him though now the man would be out in the street, mixing with other people. It would be almost impossible to pick him up. But . . . There was a faint moan from the man on the floor whom Morgan had thought dead He swung back quickly and knelt beside the mortally wounded Doc. Though dying, Felkes sensed the presence of somebody beside him. He twitched his head around a little, worked his mouth. Then it came in a squeaky whisper:

"—went over there and said I needed some money . . . Yes-s . . . Told him what I knew about—a-bout—" The thread of voice died out for a few moments When he spoke again, he failed to finish his last sentence, failed to mention a name. "He—h-he called me a—dirt-y black—blackmailer . . . threatened to have me thrown

out—out."

Morgan leaned down close. "Who, Doc? Who did this?" He saw the Doc's eyes flicker briefly. "Who is the key man, Doc?" Morgan was positive that Doc Felkes' murder was somehow linked in with the bogus Masked Rider and the whole Black Bunch affair.

"He—he wouldn't give me—money." The Doc was speaking in a shadow of a whisper now. "He called me a . . . Then wh-when I w-walk in here, this hombre from—the—the—b—" His voice snapped off like a broken string. There was one wheezing sound.

"Who was this hombre who—" Morgan began, but he didn't bother finishing it. He put fingers on Doc's pulse. There was none.

Morgan thought swiftly. If he were caught with the corpse, himself a stranger in this town, things would go rough for him. The killer and whoever was behind him would be only too glad to egg on folks to a lynching party and make a cottonwood apple out of him.

He had to get out fast, and unseen, if possible. There was nothing he could do for the Doc now. He opened the back door and slipped out into the drizzle. A woman in a sunbonnet in the next yard, a white-haired woman, was hurriedly taking wash off the line before it became soaked. She looked over as the door clicked behind Wayne Morgan. He turned the other way quickly and walked along behind the stores and houses. When he figured he had gone sufficient distance for the drizzle to mask him, he turned up an alley and emerged into the main street.

The dying Doc said he had gone "over there," been called a blackmailer after asking for money, then practically thrown out. Said he had known about something. Morgan had seen the Doc go to the bank. He had probably seen Big Jim Danners. But that might not mean anything.

As Morgan strode along past the Doc's office on the other side of the street, he tried to think of what Doc Felkes knew that could put him in a position to demand money from Big Jim Danners. Then he recalled one thing Doc Felkes did know. The Doc had treated the bogus Masked Rider for his wounds and had evidently recognized him. The implication brought Morgan up short. It seemed impossible.

HE STARTED forward again through the thin drizzle just as Red Corlee, walking stiffly, rounded the corner from a side street. With him was a gunman of the outfit, the one with a patch over his eye. Corlee spotted Wayne Morgan first. And recognized him.

"There's the snake who was at the Wimmel place the other night!" Corlee yelled. "The dirty—" Then he remembered his own rôle in the affair. "He was one of the raidin' bunch," he shouted quickly. He grabbed for both of his hoglegs. "Give yourself up, mister!"

Morgan had no idea of doing any such thing, of course. He could go for only one weapon with that wounded left arm stiff and almost useless. But he beat Red Corlee, who had slapped his hat back onto his shoulders, to the draw. Gun reports thundered out as men and screaming women dashed for safety. Morgan saw Corlee involuntarily duck as a slug horneted just past his head.

Corlee's first bullet gouged bark from a tree at Morgan's elbow. Morgan glided behind the tree. Three guns—Corlee's two and Patch Eye's one—plowed more furrows in the tree trunk.

Cool, Morgan flung sideward behind the back of a ranch wagon on one side of the road, then moved to the middle of the street where he could get a shot at his attackers. Red Corlee also swung out into the road. The two moved closer toward each other, holding, to get into more effective range, a pair of stalking gun tigers. Morgan suddenly dropped to one knee as Corlee triggered. Morgan had an incredible instinct to tell when a man was going to press the trigger.

Patch Eye was working cautiously around the animals at a hitchrail to get an angle shot at Wayne Morgan. But the cowboy's weapon ripped two ragged slashes of powder flame from its muzzle.

Corlee stopped as dead as if poleaxed. His guns dropped. He started to spin slowly, went to his knees like a man in prayer. Then he slammed over, face-down in the wet dust. And the crimson, streaming from his skull ran in a little river down a wagon wheel rut.

"Great snakes, he's killed him!" somebody shouted.

Morgan looked around quickly, on guard. Patch Eye had already fled up the bank steps to seek protection behind one of the white pillars. Morgan's eyes swiveled to the other side of the road, then stopped suddenly. Emerging from the doorway of the B-J Land Syndicate was Big Jim Danners.

"Carry Corlee into the bank!" he ordered. "We'll get a doctor. There may still be something that can be done!"

He ran out into the road as he gave orders and folks reappeared from cover.

There was a shrill screech from across the street, and Morgan saw the old woman with the sunbonnet who had been taking in her wash next to the Doc's office. She was pointing at him in hysterical excitement.

"There he is!" she screeched. "The man who killed Doc Welkes! Stabbed him to death!"

"The Doc is dead?" somebody shouted as attention was shifted from Corlee's prone figure to the woman with her piercing voice.

"Yes!" she shrieked. "He's lying in his back office dead! I saw that man comin' out the back door. It looked suspicious to me, so I went over and there was poor Doctor Felkes dead—dead behind his desk—stabbed to death by this miserable dog of a killer!"

Men started grimly toward Wayne Morgan, jerking out guns. He shot a glance behind him. The road was blocked by other men who had come out of cover now that the gun duel was over. Morgan started toward his right, but three men emerging from a barroom had hauled up short on the steps, hands slapping to their holsters.

"The dirty sidewinder, killin' a man like poor old Doc, a helpless little critter!" Somebody roared, "Come on, boys."

Doc, despite all his faults, had been beloved in Swellfork.

There was only one avenue of escape for Morgan. That was past the screeching woman who had branded him a killer. No men with filled holsters were over there yet. He took the chance as slugs jetted the wet road around him, kicking up little spatters of mud. He made the sidewalk, raced by the old woman who was screaming like a banshee now, and plunged into a narrow alley between two stores. . . .

BLUE HAWK, with his incredible trail instinct, had patiently worked southward, picking up the sign of the Black Bunch and the bogus Masked Rider, or the man who had been substituting for him. Late in the night, the riders bore eastward to a chimney butte, then entered a narrow little valley. The trail ran in the bed of a long dried-up stream course.

The Yaqui had not sighted them yet nor did he expect to before he reached their hideout. The little valley elbowed sharply. And as dawn broke mistily, Hawk came out of the bottle-neck. He looked upon a sizable oval-shaped bowl with high brush-grown sides.

As the jaundiced light heightened, he made out an old dilapidated ranchhouse halfway across the bowl. One corner had caved in completely. The bunkhouse to one side was roofless, with a whole side halfway down. Behind it, a long-unused windmill leaned drunkenly, several of its vanes disintegrated completely.

The Indian read the story in a flash. The creek, a branch of the Broken Wheel that came down from the hills had for some reason dried up. Around the bowl bottom was barren land, just swells with patches of sand and browned buffalo grass, once probably fine grazing ground. So the ranch had been abandoned.

He studied the shambling old ruin as stronger light crept over the hills. Then a picketed horse somewhere in the stunted saplings along one side of the bowl whinnied. And Blue Hawk knew he had come

upon the hideout. He fingered the beautiful knife in its pouchlike sheath that hung at his belt, then walked his gray slowly forward. He knew that he was disobeying the Senor's orders for once. But he had to be sure, and there was just a chance he might be able to grab one of them and snake the man out. Then he and the Senor might be able to make him talk.

He dropped from the kak, and started on afoot. He wheeled once when he thought he caught a faint sound from behind him. Then a bird fluttered out from the saplings. Blue Hawk had started on when a slug slithered past his head whispering, "Death-th, death-th!" Hawk flung himself flat to the ground, for he was carrying no weapon but a knife. A puff of wind carried away the mist in the bowl for a moment and he was completely exposed. He could not get away as two men came running up from different angles. One carried a smoking Winchester. The other had a bared six-gun leveled on him.

"Who the devil are you?" the man with the rifle demanded.

"He's a danged Injun!" the other man growled. "Hey, redskin, what're yuh doin' here?"

Blue Hawk was trapped as the mist sifted back in. But before he got up he shifted his knife from its sheath to inside his shirt at the belt line. Then he rose slowly, feigning fear, though the Yaqui had never known it. No longer did he stand proudly with his black-haired head with the white band around it thrown back. Instead he slouched, half-cowering, with a stupid look on his usually intelligent face.

As other men, attracted by the shot, began to run out from the saplings, some of them bootless, Hawk understood the trap he had walked into. Instead of living in the old ranchhouse, the Bunch had quarters in shacks and lean-tos.

"Me, I do nothin'," he whined in broken English. "Just ride through."

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CHAPTER XI

Torture in the Outlaw Camp

A LITTLE bald-headed man with a snaky face and a scar-twisted mouth came running up to where Blue Hawk stood at bay. He was "Montana" Burts, in charge during the absence of the boss.

"What in thunder's the matter here?" he shouted

"Cussed Injun came sneakin' in, Montana," one of the sentinels explained.

Hawk put out a pleading hand. "Me, I lose way," he said. "Look for trail to Halloway." Like Morgan, he had studied a map of the region carefully. Halloway was a small town across the hills. "Think mebbe Injun get job there. Then I ride in here, see big old tepee." He pointed to house. "Injun afraid. Evil spirits in place like that."

A long-drawn fellow with spindly arms and legs came running up.

"Hey!" he yelled. "That's the dirty rat who stabbed Nick to death and slashed my arm with his blasted knife at Pencer's last night!"

Blue Hawk nodded. "*Si, amigo,* me, I was there. I was on guard but I fall asleep. Somebody, he is shoot at me. So I got to defend me." He shrugged. "I was work for Mr. Pencer. Hoss wrangler. But I not work for him no more. He is bad man, I think."

"He's a lyin' sidewinder!" the tall, thin man barked. He himself had worked for Ab Pencer after coming out of the Big House. But when the Black Bunch had been formed, the temptation had been too great. He had joined up with them. "He's lyin', Montana. Ab Pencer's grandpappy was scalped by Injuns back in the old days, so Ab hates 'em. He'd sooner hire a yeller cur dog than an Injun, I've heard him say more than once."

"Yeah, yeah." Montana Burts squirted tobacco juice into the barren ground as he squinted at Blue Hawk. The first shafts of wan sunlight were spraying over the

eastern ridges. "I got it now. He was with that Masked Rider—the fake one," he added quickly, "who was in the house. That's it!"

"The Mask Rider?" Blue Hawk tried to feign ignorance. "Him, I hear of. But—"

But he was shouted down by the chorus of agreement with Montana Burts.

"Now we can find out who that Masked Rider is, and where he holes up!" somebody shouted gleefully.

The next moment, Montana had jumped a gun against the Yaqui.

"Who is yore boss—his real name, yuh dirty spy? And where the blazes is he? Talk!"

Blue Hawk simply looked stupid and shrugged. "I tell you lie, mebbe. *Si*? No. How can I tell you 'bout fella I don't know."

Montana looked around at the Black Bunch. "He needs a little quirt treatment, I reckon. Take him over and tie him to a tree, boys."

The Indian was hauled over to in front of one of the shacks. Quickly his loose-hanging shirt was stripped from his back. He had pulled in his stomach muscles so the knife slid down inside the waistband of his trousers, held by the hilt. They failed to see it in the grayish light. Ground mist steamed up from the earth as the rising sun warmed it.

"Say, this Injun ain't got no hoglegs on him—nothin'!" a large bulging-bellied man with two chins said. He was known as "Swede" Sweeny though the map of Ireland was on his face.

"I was right fond of Joe," the tall, skinny outlaw rasped. "His boss killed Joe . . . Shucks, he's only an Injun, anyways."

"But mebbe he—" Sweeny started.

Another owlhoot was lashing Hawk's arms around the tree.

"Stand back, boys." Montana came up with a braided black quirt having a metal tip on the end. "Yuh wanta make heap big talkum, Injun, and save yoreself heap big grief? Huh?"

Blue Hawk remained silent. Silence gripped the little ring of men, too. Then the air was cut by an angry swishing sound. Next, a spat, the lash of leather against human flesh. It came a second time, the quirt flailing across the Yaqui's brown back. Swede Sweeny gulped, but Blue Hawk stood against the tree, adamant as stone, eyes closed, and his face as graven as a statue's.

"Give it to him, Montana!" the skinny man cried.

"Watch me!"

Three more terrific slashes with the leather that bit into the flesh like a live snake. Still there wasn't a single sound, not even a moan, from the Indian.

"I'll make the low-down polecat yelp for mercy 'fore I'm through!" Montana vowed, with a curse.

Soon the sweat was pouring from him despite the chill of early morning. His blows became weaker as his arm tired. The Yaqui's back was a crazily trellised pattern of blood welts and all sliced up.

"Here, Swede!" Montana offered him the bloody quirt.

SWEDE SWEENY, pale as alkali, shook his head. "Got that rheumatiz back in my shoulder, Montana. Couldn't hit worth a lick."

"Give it to me!" The tall skinny outlaw took the quirt. "Wanta get yore tongue flappin' yet, spy?"

There was no answer. The skinny man went to work. Although he seemed like nothing more than a bag of bones, he had terrific leverage in his long arm. The leather descended with a snarling crack, rose, descended again, rose. One stroke curled over a shoulder, the metal tip lacing open the Yaqui's cheek. Still no slightest sound from him. Then his knees buckled a little. Another few moments, and his body was sagging against the tree. Sweating now, the skinny man spat out cotton and brought his arm back.

"Wait!" one of them cried. "T'ain't no use any more. He's out cold."

Montana cursed furiously. Then he told them to cut the Indian loose and truss up his hands and legs.

"We'll go to work on him when he comes to. Mebbe a little branding'll help.

Right now my belly's callin' for grub."

Big Sweeny put on the unconscious Indian's shirt before they trussed him up. . . .

When Blue Hawk returned to consciousness, he could tell by the sun that it was almost noontime. He sank his teeth into his lower lip when he managed to sit up. His back was one chunk of agonized flesh. And the blood had crusted to his shirt so that every pull on it produced a spurt of fresh pain. He finally got his vision cleared enough to see that, out in the open, the Bunch were sitting around a big pot slung over the fire, eating their midday meal. Swede Sweeny, facing Blue Hawk's way, saw him sitting up. The big-bellied, lumbering man rose and got an extra tin plate. He filled it and brought it over to the Indian.

"That's right—give him some grub so he won't pass out from weakness when we get down to the brandin' job," Montana Burts called.

"He can't eat less'n I untie his hands," Sweeny called back.

"Go ahead. He can't run with his legs tied anyway. And I don't think he's in much shape for runnin' even if he did get loose."

"Thank you, senor," Blue Hawk said. He forced himself to eat to keep his strength up. He knew there was more punishment, brutal punishment, in store for him. He was about finished eating when the guard down near the bottle-neck entrance whistled sharply twice.

Instantly every man was on his feet, plucking at a holster as they faded from sight amidst the saplings. Then the guard called:

"It's only Emilio!'

Emilio proved to be a breed, an oversized clumsy button in his teens, stupid-faced, with dull, vacant eyes. He dismounted by the fire, where the men had reassembled, and handed a note to Montana Burts. The boy was not far removed from being a half-wit. As Montana labored to read the note with working lips, Emilio wandered around, staring into the shacks.

"Good gravy, boys!" Montana ejaculated. "We're hittin' the bank tonight—leastwise tomorrow morning about two o'clock. Yeah!"

"The bank? How in blazes we goin' to get into it?"

"Leave that to the Chief. We're lootin' it. And afterwards, we hit out for Butch Burns' place. We're to meet the rest of the outfit there after dark tonight!"

All of them began to jabber at once in their excitement, forgetting Blue Hawk's presence completely. Hawk dug a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper from a pants pocket. He began to write quickly.

The Bunch is going to hit the bank tomorrow about two in morning. Will try to be there. BH

Hawk slipped his knife from his waistband, unscrewed the handle. Inside it there was a small hollow space. He inserted the rolled-up note in the hollow, then screwed the hilt back on.

"Burns' cow outfit?" one of the owlhoots by the fire cried. "What the blazes is this kind of—"

"Didn't yuh know?" Montana told him. "Butch has thrown in with the Bunch."

BLUE HAWK was wondering how to get the half-witted young breed's attention. That proved to be the least of his troubles, for when he looked up, Emilio was standing about ten feet off, staring at him. Blue Hawk beckoned him over with a gesture of his chin. The youth came slowly.

"You're from Swellfork?" the Indian whispered quickly in Spanish. The breed nodded. "Would you like to make some *dinero*, maybe five dollars?"

Morgan would give the boy at least that if and when he delivered the knife.

The halfwit's eyes glittered. "Yeth, yeth," he said, lisping because of a split palate.

Hawk held out the knife. "Joe Ace's eating place—you know where that is?" Morgan had told him about Marie Burns and that she worked there.

"Joe Ath—sure."

"All right. Take this knife there and ask for a man named Morgan. Under-

stand? Morgan. Don't give the knife to anybody else."

The oversized half-wit nodded excitedly. "Joe Ath. Morgan. Yeth." He clutched for the knife.

"But," Blue Hawk warned, "nobody must see that knife but Morgan."

The half-wit nodded again, then Montana called him.

"Hey, Emilio! Ride back and tell 'em in Swellfork—the man who sent yuh—that we'll be at Burns' place early tonight."

Emilio rode back down into the bottleneck of the narrow valley. The bunch began to saddle up.

"How about him?" the skinny owlhoot asked, thumbing at the Indian sitting with head bowed.

Montana thought a moment. "Well, we ain't got time to fiddle with him now. Gotta be hittin' the trail. Can't leave him here without a guard—and we want every last manjack. We'll take him along. The boss'll know what to do with him. Come on now, shake a leg."

Back astride his cayuse, hands lashed behind him, Blue Hawk rode into the narrow valley that led out to the El Toro Negro range. There the little cavalcade turned north.

After riding for some time they crossed the main road leading into Swellfork, moved on to the Burns outfit. Dusk had started to settle like a slow-dropping diaphanous curtain. They were a few miles below where Blue Hawk had hidden the cavvy when he made his play. He was riding at the rear with Swede Sweeny beside him. The Swede had rolled and lighted quirlies for him several times, once had asked him how he felt.

When the Yaqui had settled the cavvy in the hidden draw, he had taken a little look-see around the nearby country to familiarize himself with it in case of an emergency. And he knew that just ahead, over a small knoll beside the road, a little gully angled off eastward.

"Reckon I'll never see my woman an' my boy no more," he muttered.

Swede looked at him, pity on his good-natured face.

"Yuh got a wife and a younker, Injun?"

Hawk made a slight inclination of his head. "Good woman. She'll never know I been shot. That's what they do to me at end of ride, no?"

"Oh, I don't know," Sweeny said.

"Or worse," Blue Hawk sighed. With knee pressure he had gradually slowed his well-trained mount so that they had dropped a little behind. "Mebbeso I should make a break for it an' get shot in back an' get it over. My boy, he was growing big, strong, too." They were almost at the gully.

"Gotta couple boys of my own. Ain't seen 'em in over a year. Mebbe it's better. They don't know what their pop is." Swede bowed his head.

They were opposite the knoll. With the pressure of his knees Hawk veered his cayuse off the trail suddenly and sent it bolting up that low knoll. There was no shot, no outcry for several seconds, valu-

[*Turn page*]

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able seconds. Sweeny was giving him a break!

He hit the top of the knoll. Then there was a wild shot far to the left of him and Sweeny's shout. The next instant the Yaqui was dropping over the other side of it and streaking for the mouth of the gully.

Then some of the bunch were coming around the side of the knoll. Bullets winged close. And through the crash of reports Hawk caught the flat *spang-g* of a Winchester being levered into action. That slug drilled a hole in his shirt sleeve. But he got into the gully and was around the elbow of one of its bends before they appeared in it.

Where the gully angled again, he veered over the shaley bottom to a spot behind a big chunk of outcropping rock. Leaving the gray ground-anchored, he scooted up into the brush. It was almost dark now, with some stars appearing dimly. They might get his horse, but they would never be able to track him down afoot in this brush.

The Bunch came almost to the bend. He could see their vague figures over the top of the rock. They pulled up.

"Shucks," Montana said, "we'll never find that danged Injun now, not at night. They're slippery as snakes. To blazes with him! We got big business to attend to. Come on."

He swung his mount to lead the way back.

CHAPTER XII

Fitting the Puzzle

WHEN hoofs became a faint beat in the night, the Yaqui slid down the side of the gully and remounted. At the far end he swung around to the back of the hidden draw. His back ached excruciatingly, but with true Indian stoicism, he ignored it as he got a fresh pony from the cavvy.

He also got the roll that contained the jet-black garb of the Masked Rider and saddled up Midnight, the ebony stallion the masked man always rode. Leading the black, he moved out onto the trail when he was seized by a last-moment inspiration. He turned up toward Ab Pencer's place. As he neared the ranchyard, his eyes, catlike in the dark, picked up Pencer sitting in a rocker on his front porch. When the Yaqui, slipping up to the edge of the porch as silent as a ghost, spoke, Ab Pencer almost fell out of the chair.

"Wayne Morgan, Senor Pencer, is in town. There's going to be trouble there tonight. I think you'd better come in and see him."

Pencer leaned over the railing. "By grab, I shore will! I got somethin' to settle with that lazy good-for-nothin' varmint." He bawled down to the bunkhouse for them to saddle him a horse.

In a few minutes he and Blue Hawk were riding down the trail toward the Swellfork road. The Indian asked if he didn't think it wise to bring some of his men along.

"Dang it, no!" Pencer shot back. "I can fire that gopher without no help. I hired him to protect me. Twice I been in trouble, and that scissors bill ain't been nowheres nigh. I'll git my *dinero* back if I have to boot him the length of Main Street, too!"

Blue Hawk smiled in the darkness. . . .

At that moment, in town, Wayne Morgan pulled open the screen door at the back of Joe Ace's place, causing the green bottle flies to buzz angrily, and stepped in. Joe, a Chinese, was cutting up meat for a stew at the spotless wooden table. How he got the last name of Ace nobody knew.

Morgan stood panting a moment from hard running. But he had given those who wanted his hide as a killer the slip. Now he had reached the place where Marie Burns worked. It was the only place he could think of as a refuge in the town.

She sighted him from the front of the restaurant and came running back to the

kitchen, grasping him by his arms.

"Oh, are you all right?" she cried, for word that Morgan had slain Doc Felkes had spread like a prairie fire in parched grass.

"Hi, hi, hi," Joe Ace said.

Marie turned to him. "Joe, you haven't seen this man, understand? You don't know any Mr. Morgan."

"I know nothing. Plenty dumb, Joe Ace. Hi, hi, hi."

Marie led Morgan into one of the two back booths in the eating place. It was empty, the crowd having already left. In the booth they wouldn't be noticed from the street.

"Wayne Morgan, you didn't kill Doc Felkes, did you?"

"Of course not, Marie. I wanted to talk to him. He had certain information, I learned. When I walked into his office he was dyin'. Somebody had knifed him. I looked out and saw a man in black shirt and pants hustlin' away and—"

He broke off short. That was what he had been seeking to dredge from the bottom of his mind in all the excitement. The bank guards of Big Jim Danners wore black shirts and pants. Marie grabbed at his forearm, breaking the train of his thoughts.

"Have you found out anything about the will yet?" she said in a low, tight voice.

He frowned thoughtfully as he built a quirly. "I'd aimed to bluff Doc into tellin' his part in it—but I was too late."

Her face fell. "I'm scared now," she murmured. "And I'd almost pulled off my scheme posing as the Masked Rider, it seems. Between Butch's gambling and drinking, and the stock I'd run off that he'd been planning to send to market, he's broke. And he's thrown in with that Masked Rider's Black Bunch. In that way he can get some money, and protection as well. One of the boys on the spread, who's always been my friend dropped in and told me about it confidentially this morning."

"In with the Black Bunch, eh? That's goin' to make it bad for him." Morgan was sure of that because he was almost dead certain he was on the verge of solving the whole mystery, then smashing this band with their bloody looting of the El Toro range.

HE WAS mashing out his smoke in a saucer when he glanced over the top of the front of the booth. Out front was Patch Eye, who had been with Corlee in the gunslinging street duel with Morgan, and also in the gunfight out at Pencer's. Two other men came up and joined him, undoubtedly members of the Black Bunch, too. Patch Eye reached for the restaurant door handle. Morgan, half bent, glided to the outer side of the booth.

"Black Bunch gents about to come in," he said, low.

The girl immediately pointed to a built-in stairway in the back corner across the room.

"Go upstairs. My room is the second on the right going up the hall."

He shook his head. "They'll spot me if I try to cross that open space."

"Here!" She rose quickly, looked around. "Edge around the corner of the booth. Back of it are the shelves where we keep the china. Get behind the curtain in front of the shelves."

He was out of the booth and around it with the swift grace of a tiger in motion. Just as the front door swung open, he slid behind the calico curtain that covered the chinaware. The curtain, over six feet in length, spread the width of the shelves. It was hung from a rod that projected several inches from the shelves. A lean man could stand behind it without making any obvious bump.

Patch Eye and the other two came all the way back to the booth which Morgan and Marie had just been occupying. They ordered steaks with coffee.

"Steaks rare," Patch Eye said.

Marie's heels tapped into the kitchen and the men began to talk in low, guarded voices.

"Corlee shore was lucky," one of them said. "That Morgan feller had him whupped."

"Shore was," another put in. "When

they got him inside the bank they found he'd just been creased, his scalp grooved. All that blood made it look like he had a window in his skull for shore."

"Yup," the third man said.

Wayne Morgan went rigid with surprise. He heard one of them curse, saying he'd like a shot of red-eye, but it seemed the boss had forbidden them to touch the stuff that day.

"Well, it's a big job we're swingin' tonight. They say the Chief hisself is goin' to be there."

"He was plumb mad about the way things was handled out at Pencer's place—lettin' that other Masked Rider get away," the flat-voiced man put in. "Corlee's a gunman, that's all. Poor Joe, when he was our Masked Rider boss, we had a real leader. He was smart. Plumb."

Morgan was dumfounded. Then Corlee, instead of being the masquerading Masked Rider, had merely been taking over the rôle of the dead Joe at Pencer's. And the mysterious Joe was the Chief's brother.

Marie came in with the steaks. Talk broke off. Behind the curtain, Morgan told himself:

"That proves Corlee is one of the Bunch, not just planted there to get the evidence on 'em."

The three Black Bunch outlaws ate in silence save for the clatter of their knives and forks on the plates. They gulped like wolves, each with his head low over his food. Finishing, they fired up smokes. The man who wanted a drink again bewailed the lack of it.

"Well, let's amble," Patch Eye said. "Corlee said to keep watchin' the whole pueblo for that Morgan."

Morgan heard the rattle of their spurs as they left. The door slammed. Marie stuck her head behind the curtain.

"Come on now, quick!"

She took his hand and whisked him across the open space to the enclosed stairs, led the way up. In the upper hall she turned toward the front, then opened the door of a small but neat room with polka-dot curtains at the window. There was a small bed and rocking chair.

"Here!" She gave him a saucer she had plucked from the shelf. "So you can smoke. I'll be back later." She whisked away.

HE SAT in the rocker by the window, thinking, staring unseeingly over the roof of the one-storied building next door, fitting the pieces of his puzzle together. Joe, the leader of the Black Bunch, the bogus Masked Rider, had been the Chief's brother. Doc Felkes had treated him, had recognized him. Felkes, dying, had told of going to the bank to get money, of being called a blackmailer. It was undoubtedly Big Jim Danners to whom he had gone. Felkes had been killed by a black-garbed man, clothed exactly like those bank guards. Killed, obviously, because of what he knew. After the gun duel, Morgan had seen Big Jim emerging from the office of the mysterious B-J Land Syndicate.

"B-J," Morgan repeated softly, after drawing on his cigarette. "B-J—that's it. Big Jim! Danners is the man they call the Chief! He's been using Pencer as a cat's-paw, advancing him the *dinero* to make short term loans, then hittin' the debtors with his Masked Rider Black Bunch so they went broke. Then the foreclosure. And the B-J Land Syndicate buys up the place from Pencer, givin' him a small profit. They're grabbin' up the whole El Toro range at bargain rates!" In his excitement he rose and began to pace. "Big Jim is the B-J Land Syndicate. No question. Joe, the fake Masked Rider, was his brother. That's the story. The Chief's brother! Big Jim had Doc murdered because of what he knew, and tonight they'll be hittin' Wimmel's place. I've got to get out of Swellfork, somehow."

He tried to figure a way, but realized he was a marked man in town, branded a murderer.

"I might try to get to Big Jim Danners," he said aloud, just as the door opened and Marie came in.

She had a tray of hot food with a pot of steaming coffee. He realized he hadn't eaten since morning. She put it on the

little table where the wash bowl stood.

"You won't be able to reach him," she said. "He left a little while ago on the stagecoach for Halloway. And there's a breed boy downstairs who says he has something for you. He won't give it to anybody else. He says an Indian sent him."

"Blue Hawk!" Morgan burst out. "Bring him to the foot of the stairs, Marie, please!"

CHAPTER XIII

On Vengeance Bent

CATFOOTING down the stairs, Morgan found the restaurant empty and the over-sized youthful breed, Emilio, waiting there. He looked at Wayne Morgan with a vacant stare.

"Mr. Morgan," he said like a parrot. When the cowboy nodded, he produced the knife. "Injun give this to me. Tell me to take to you. You give me *dinero,* Injun say."

Morgan recognized the knife as Blue Hawk's. He took it and brought out some bills.

"Where was the Indian when he gave you this?"

The half-wit shrugged. "In the camp."

"What camp?"

"I dunno. Off there." He pointed toward the southeast. "He was prisoner." He got a flash of intelligence. "They were getting ready to ride out as I left."

"Thanks."

Morgan gave him ten dollars, then hurried back to the room to unscrew the hilt of the knife. He worked the message out of the hollow hilt, read it, and gasped. So it was the bank they were going to loot, not the Wimmel outfit! But how were they going to smash into the bank without rousing the whole town?

Then he remembered that Hawk was a captive, wondering how he could get to him and free him. But the young half-wit had said the Indian's captives were breaking camp. Morgan had no idea where they might be going. There was nothing he could do. And he knew, anyway, from experience, that the poker-faced Yaqui had an uncanny ability to take care of himself.

His thoughts turned again to how the robbers would get into the bank. The Chief, Danners, had left town on the stage, but it would be a simple matter for him to drop off at some point along the line, be picked up by one of the Bunch and return in time for the raid at two in the morning. Big Jim Danners would have keys to the bank. He would know the combination of the big safe. That was the answer!

Morgan's mind worked swiftly. Here was his chance to grab the whole outfit, including the Chief, as well as whoever was riding as the Masked Rider that night —probably Corlee again. But Morgan knew he couldn't do it alone.

He called down to Marie. When she emerged from the kitchen, he said:

"Do yuh happen to know if Mike Wimmel's in town?"

She nodded. "I saw him come in this morning." She flicked a shawl off a nearby hook. "I'll try to find him."

Morgan had smoked two quirlies when Marie knocked, then opened the bedroom door.

"Wimmel's downstairs," she said.

"Send him up, please," Morgan said.

Sawed-off, pot-bellied Mike Wimmel with his puckered blue eyes came into the room panting from the climb up the stairs. He started with surprise when he recognized Morgan, the man who had helped beat off the attempted raid of the Black Bunch on his outfit. Then he came across the bedroom with outstretched hand.

"Howdy, Morgan," he said heartily. "Danged glad to see yuh again. Anything I can do, just name it."

"Yuh can do plenty, I hope, Wimmel," Morgan told him quietly. "Got any men in town with yuh—good tough men?"

Wimmel nodded. "So happens I have. Two. One was the brother of Jake Gal-

lagher, one of my cowhands who died of wounds he got the night the Masked Rider's Black Bunch hit my place. The other was Jake's pard. Them two have been fightin' mad ever since. This concern the Masked Rider and his outfit? I hope so."

Morgan nodded. "They're goin' to hit the bank at two tomorrow morning." He gave him a brief outline of the main details. "And, Wimmel, believe me when I tell yuh that Masked Rider is a fake. I happen to know the real one."

"What?"

"I swear it, Wimmel. He ain't far from here right now. Fact, I hope to have him sidin' us tonight. I say 'us'—hopin' yuh'll string along and help."

"Yuh couldn't keep me out of gettin' a crack at them sidewinders, Morgan. But the real Masked Rider—yuh're shore about him?"

"As shore as I'm standin' here. I can't guarantee he'll be here with us tonight, but I'm hopin'."

Wimmel perched on the side of the girl's bed as the first twilight came and the drizzle eased off. "Count me in. My two men'll be in here for dinner in a while. I'll get 'em then."

"It's goin' to be tough," Morgan warned.

Wimmel nodded as he lighted his pipe.

THEY sat then and waited, the toughest thing in the world to do. They talked sporadically. Wimmel wanted to know if Morgan had any plan of action.

"Yes. To let 'em go into the bank, then pen them inside."

Night fell at last. Marie came up and said that Wimmel's two cowhands were downstairs eating dinner. Wimmel went down. When he came back, he nodded.

"They're buyin' chips," he announced. "They'll wait downstairs."

Again there was the waiting. Morgan smoked down quirly after quirly, wondering how Blue Hawk was making out. Then there was a commotion downstairs. Standing at the partially opened door, Morgan heard a man saying:

"Marie, I don't give a hang! Some danged Injun who said he was a friend of Morgan's told me I'd probably find him here. So don't give me no windies. He's in my hire and I aim to tell the big tinhorn off." It was Ab Pincer. "That low-down—"

Morgan stepped to the head of the stairs. When Marie glanced up, he signaled her to let Pencer come up. Pencer came storming into the bedroom.

"Morgan, yuh no-good two-bit, yuh're fired!" he roared. "I hired yuh to pertect me, and what happens? Some gent who calls himself the Masked Rider comes to my place. Beats up the late Doc. Threatens me. Where was you?" He spiked a skinny finger at Morgan.

"He *was* the genuine Masked Rider," said Morgan. "I happen to know him."

"What-t?" Pencer's jaw dropped. "Then the Black Bunch with another Masked Rider come in. There was a gunfight. And where in thunderation was you? Probably bouncin' around in some honky-tonk and—"

"That Masked Rider with the Bunch was Red Corlee, a gunman and a wanted killer," Morgan put in.

Again Pencer was brought up short.

"Red Corlee? Why he's the man they say yuh shot down and danged nigh killed here today, after yuh killed Doc Felkes. Yuh didn't do that, did yuh?"

Morgan shook his head. "No. And yuh ain't firin' me, Pencer. I resigned an hour ago." He ignored the cowman's protests. "I got important business to handle, Pencer. The Black Bunch and the fake Masked Rider are goin' to loot the bank tonight. And their Chief will be with 'em to let 'em in. The Chief happens to be Big Jim Danners. He's the man who forced yuh into that short-term loan business, then financed yuh, ain't he?"

Pencer flushed with chagrin. "Yes," he finally admitted. "I wanted to get out. But he wouldn't let me. Threatened me and—"

"I know all that," Morgan said.

"How? I never told yuh." As Morgan shrugged, he went on, "I hired yuh 'cause I was afraid they'd burn me down because

I was buckin'. Morgan, mebbe I was a mite hasty-tempered and—"

Morgan cut him short. "I aim to break the Black Bunch and get the fake Masked Rider and Big Jim tonight. Mike Wimmel's backin' my play. We'll have heavy odds against us, though." He waited.

Pencer drew himself up. "I ain't a young 'un no more. But—well, I can still trigger a gun. I'm stringin' with yuh too, Morgan!"

He put out his hand.

The restaurant downstairs closed up a few minutes later. Joe Ace put up his window shutters and pulled the shade at the front door. All lights were extinguished save for a candle on the table in the back booth. Morgan and the two other men went downstairs to join Wimmel's cowhands. Wayne Morgan was still wondering about Blue Hawk, though he now knew, through Pencer, that the Indian had escaped.

Wimmel was saying, "Morgan here says we'll mebbe have the real Masked Rider—not the impostor who's been leadin' the Black Bunch—on our side tonight. Morgan's expectin' him and—"

The wailing cry of a mountain lion came from outside in the night. Morgan moved out of the booth.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said hurriedly, went out through the kitchen, and opened the back door warily.

Blue Hawk materialized out of the blackness like a wraith.

"Senor," he said softly. "Hola."

Morgan grabbed him by the shoulders he was so glad to see him. The Yaqui said he had Midnight, the Masked Rider's stallion, and his black garb up the side road. That fitted perfectly into Wayne Morgan's plans.

He told Hawk to wait.

Back at the booth he announced: "The Masked Rider is here. The real thing. He's backin' our play."

"Great!" cried Wimmel.

"I've got to go get him," Morgan went on. "When he comes, he'll be in command." He met the Yaqui outside the door.

BLUE HAWK led the way through the shadows. As the Indian glided through a patch of moonlight Morgan saw his blood-stained shirt crusted to his back. He asked anxiously what had happened to him.

Hawk shrugged. "At their hideout camp, they tried to make me tell about you. Hawk, he played dumb Injun. So they lashed me. But they found out nothing." The Indian's face was Sphinxlike, but there was a triumphant note in his voice.

Morgan's face was hard and dark with fury. "That adds to the score I have to settle with 'em."

They cut over to a side street and moved up to a little grove of trees where the black stallion was tethered.

In a short time the back door of Joe Ace's place slammed behind a man. In the booth Pencer said:

"It's Morgan comin' back, I—"

Then he half rose behind the table, eyes bulging. It was the Masked Rider, complete with long black riding cloak, black pants and shirt, and black sombrero. And he wore a black domino mask over his eyes. The others sat transfixed.

"Reckon Wayne Morgan told you I'd arrived," the masked man said, in a harsh bass voice. "I'm in on this play. I aim to fix the polecat who's been impersonating me. If you men will follow me, we can smash this whole vicious setup."

He stood towering over them like a great bird of prey in that black outfit. His eyes behind the mask crackled with cold fire.

Mike Wimmel hammered the table with a big-boned fist.

"I'm with yuh to the bitter end, mister!"

"Count on me, too," Ab Pencer put in. "Though yuh shore gave me a rough time the other night . . . Say, where's Morgan?"

"He said something about scouting that side road," the Masked Rider answered. "He expects them to slip in that way." He leaned against the end of the booth, drawing on a quirly.

There was practically no talk now. They

were grim with the knowledge of the mission before them. One of Wimmel's men muttered: "They killed my brother." Finally Ab Pencer pulled out a big gold-case hunting watch.

"One-thirty," he announced.

"We better get out there and get set," the Masked Rider announced.

He led the way to the kitchen door. When he opened it, moonlight from the new risen three-quarter moon poured in in a yellow shaft. It was going to be a bright night. Outside, the Masked Rider took the black stallion's reins.

"They'll probably go in the back way," he murmured. "Attract less attention. Still, we must guard against any contingency."

He assigned Pencer and one of Wimmel's hands to stick between a couple of houses across the street from the bank. When the Black Bunch came, if they went to the rear, those two could slip around the trees that flanked the north side of the bank.

"We'll let them get in, even open the safe—that'll be clinching evidence against them—then try to pen them in there."

"That was Morgan's plan," Wimmel said.

The Masked Rider nodded. Then he led Wimmel and his other man across the road. Several honky-tonks and barrooms were still going full blast. Two men wavered down on the corner, singing "Buffalo Gals" before they finally weaved their way from sight. Big Jim and his Black Bunch outfit had picked a perfect time for the job. Decent citizens would be home in bed. The drunken riffraff on the streets and in the bars wouldn't be likely to notice anything amiss.

The Robin Hood outlaw moved around in back of the pretentious bank building. There was a big bare yard. At its rear stood a small clump of cottonwoods. Over to the right was a pile of neatly stacked crates from one of the stores fronting on the main street.

The Masked Rider put the other two men in the cottonwoods. He himself got behind the crates after giving them orders to make no play until he made a move.

There was more waiting. From the main street came the jangle of a dancehall band, a burst of drunken laughter.

CHAPTER XIV

The Showdown Has Come

THE Masked Rider had just smoked a quirly down to a hot coal, and pinched it out, when the cry of the mountain lion came from far up the dirt side road. Blue Hawk was signaling the approach of the bogus Masked Rider and his band. And the Chief, Big Jim. The Masked Rider eased out his guns, called softly to the men in the cottonwoods that the outlaws were coming. In a couple of minutes they heard the sound of hoof-beats. The pace of the horses dropped to a walk. The first riders appeared around the rear corner of the bank. One was the bogus Masked Rider—Red Corlee, the Masked Rider figured.

The showdown had come!

This time the rest of the Bunch wore no neckerchief masks. They would look too suspicious in town, of course. Watching them swing into the backyard in the full sweep of the moonlight, the Masked Rider sought in vain for Big Jim Danners. He didn't seem to be with them. Another guided a ranch wagon into the yard and up to the little platform at the back door. The wagon's axle hubs had been so well greased that there was no sound save the grind of its steel-rimmed wheels on the grassy dirt.

Things proceeded swiftly, as if carefully rehearsed. Men swung off their horses. The imitation Masked Rider ran up to the little platform and there was the scratch of a key in the iron-ribbed oaken back door. It swung inward. Two men jumped up onto the platform. One put a match to a coal-oil torch he carried and stepped inside. The other followed with drawn Colts.

It was a smooth job, all right. Another

man mounted the platform, lighted another torch, and swiftly moved inside. Then the gunmen of the Bunch began to file in. One man was left with the horses over near the cottonwoods. Two others were left as guard on the back door.

The Masked Rider eased around the end of the packing cases. Across the moonlight-bathed clearing, he saw a slight movement in the high grass. Blue Hawk's head appeared a moment, gave a quick nod toward the door guards, then ducked from sight again.

Those two worked like a well-drilled team with an almost telepathic understanding. The Masked Rider eased along in the shadow of the high-piled crates. He spotted Wimmel creeping from the cottonwoods, working up behind that guard with the horses. He wouldn't have to worry about him, anyway.

He got down to the far end of the crates, nearer the bank. He could see Blue Hawk moving like a shadow close against the back wall of the building, almost on all fours in the high grass. Then one of the guards spotted the Masked Rider as he moved away into the open moonlight.

"I could of sworn I saw yuh go inside, Chief," he gasped.

The Masked Rider walked boldly toward the steps. "What in blazes are you two galoots doing here?" he demanded. "Holding a convention? I told you I wanted absolute silence! You two blabbing away like—"

Swinging one gun carelessly by the trigger guard, he trotted up the steps. The next moment he had flipped the butt of that Colts into the palm of his hand and crashed the barrel down over the skull of that sentinel. Simultaneously, Blue Hawk leaped out of the grass and onto the other guard. The Yaqui's forearm locked hard against the man's windpipe so he couldn't even murmur, much less shout a warning. With his other hand, Hawk ripped the stunned man's gun from his hand before he could get it cocked. The Indian batted him with it twice, then let him topple over into the grass. The masked man had lowered his own victim over the steps.

The Masked Rider edged his head around the door for a look-see inside. It was an eerie scene with coal-oil torches casting great licking tongues of unsteady light up the walls. One man with a torch was inside the railing, back by the massive safe. Somebody in there gave a long drawn "Ah-h—" of satisfaction.

There was a muffled clanking—the big handle of the safe being thrown, after the combination had opened the tumblers. Somebody called a muffled command. The gunmen of the Bunch began to spread out in a line toward the back door. It was to be a bucket line as in fighting a fire. The Masked Rider saw the first canvas bank bag of specie passed from hand to hand rapidly, moving to the door.

He whispered something quickly to Blue Hawk. Close to the building with its big overhanging eaves, the moonlight did not touch them. The sack of specie reached the end man. He started to run out to the platform to toss it into the ranch wagon. Hawk stepped into the dim hallway. The Masked Rider had eased back out of sight.

"I'll take it," Blue Hawk said in his perfect English, without any accent.

"We're all going to be filthy rich!" the other man whispered, not even looking at the Yaqui in his greed-spawned excitement. He handed over the bag. Hawk wheeled and tossed it into the wagon bed.

ANOTHER came along quickly. A third, passed from hand to hand along the line that stretched from the safe to the rear door. And the Yaqui kept tossing the bags into the wagon.

Then a small, slim figure came running out from the trees toward that little platform. The Masked Rider whipped up a gun. The advancing figure wore black trousers, a man's coat several sizes too big, with a slouch hat pulled low over the forehead. Getting closer, the new arrival called, low:

"Where's Wayne Morgan?" It was Marie Burns.

The Masked Rider almost forgot his

gruff bass as he replied:

"How should I know? Get out of here, ma'am!"

But she came on to the platform. "You're the real Masked Rider, his friend," she whispered. "I know! Is there anything I can do to help?"

The bags of specie had stopped coming, the clinking of their contents—gold, the Masked Rider figured—ceased. The last man in the line moved toward the doorway, sweating from his exertions.

"Get behind the wagon!" the Masked Rider called softly to the girl. As he himself flattened against the wall, he saw her duck under it.

There was a call from inside and the man in the doorway turned back before he could get his breath of fresh air. Again *dinero* came down the line. Only this time it was packages of hundred dollar bills each held by a band of paper. Blue Hawk kept taking those, too, and chucking them into the wagon.

Soon, though, they turned to packs of ten spots. And the Masked Rider realized that inside, at the safe, they were scraping the bottom of the barrel. It was time to make his play. He caught the eye of the girl peering through a wagon wheel and motioned her over.

"Maybe you *can* help, ma'am," he said. "When you hear the first shot inside, jump up on the box and drive the wagon out up the road away from town a little. Sabe?" He knew he would need every last man when the lead started to fly. To Hawk, he whispered: "I'm going in there now."

Blue Hawk started to shake his head. But the Masked Rider was adamant.

"If we open up on 'em when they come out some might escape by the front door. I want to make sure to get the big ones."

Both guns drawn under the black cloak around his body, he stepped in boldly and moved up the corridor and into the high-domed room of the bank. He could see the bogus Masked Rider crouched before the giant safe, handing back the packets of tens to a waiting man.

The Masked Rider glided on, up along the side wall. His eyes darted about to pick out Big Jim Danners. No sign of him. He moved toward the desk in the middle of the floor. It had a heavy wooden upright about six feet wide for a base, making a nice shield against hot lead.

The Masked Rider started over to it. Then he spotted Red Corlee just as the gunman, glancing over his shoulder from the safe, saw him. Corlee's sombrero was hanging back on his shoulders and there was a bandage on his carrot-hued head. Right on top of his yell, he triggered as he levered up his gun. The Masked Rider ducked down behind the writing table's solid base.

The masked, black-garbed figure crouched before the lower shelves of the safe jumped around, yelling:

"What's the matter?" And the Masked Rider recognized the taut voice of Big Jim Danners, the Chief. He was playing the rôle of the Masked Rider himself!

Corlee was shouting, crouched under the railing:

"The other Masked Rider—the one I had the fight with at Pencer's—he's here! Over there by that desk!"

"You're plumb loco!" Big Jim barked.

"Somebody's drivin' off with the wagon!" a man in the back corridor yelled.

He ran out the back door and into a fusillade of lead as Wimmel and his man shot from beside the bunched ponies. He went down as if his legs had been chopped from under him.

The Masked Rider, peering around the desk base, saw Corlee come up to shoot again. And let him have two blasts! Corlee half-spun with a slug in his left shoulder and dropped to his knees.

Then pandemonium and his blood brother, panic, ruled the roost.

"The Masked Rider!" Big Jim, bellowed. "Get out! Get out! Hit the saddle!"

The gunfire would bring the whole town down on them.

MEN began to claw and scream as they battled to get down that back corridor and to their horses. When two

forced their way out there was the hot crackle of gunfire from the yard. The first man pitched off the platform, the next one took a step backward involuntarily, sort of hung there, then buckled in the middle and went down on his face, blocking the doorway.

Through the gun reports, another man shrieked hysterically: "Our horses are gone! Our horses—gone!"

The Masked Rider didn't have to be told who was responsible for that coup. Blue Hawk would have stampeded the mounts the instant the shooting began.

"The front doors!" a man cried. "Let's rush this lone gopher! Come on—it's the only way!"

A rush started in the direction of the Masked Rider. He jumped, still crouched, to the other end of the desk base and cut loose with his left-hand weapon. He nicked the man in the lead in the leg but the fellow kept coming. The Masked Rider shot again, the bullet slashing the side of the man's head. He sat down heavily then, hat tumbling off as he screeched in agony, grabbing at his wound. The moonlight showed that he was the sandy-haired Butch Burns with the eyes that spied on the world from under crags of brows. The man behind him dropped with his chest shattered.

That was enough for the hard-boiled gunslicks of the Black Bunch. No longer were they deadly raiders. Now they were like stampeding animals, caught in a slaughter trap, thinking of but one thing—how to save their hides. One of them wheeled, ran down the back corridor, stripping off his gun-belt. Then with a bleat of "I surrender—don't shoot!" he stepped out onto the little platform. Others were following on his heels. Wimmel and Pencer, with the two Wimmel cowhands were closing in across the yard.

But the Masked Rider couldn't find Big Jim as he vaulted the railing. The coal-oil torches had gone out. He could hear the rumble of the excited crowd in the street. The moonlight coming through the windows didn't reach back there. But then, through the dimness, he made out Big Jim, in the Masked Rider outfit, lifting a heavy iron trap-door that opened into the subterranean vaults below. He had one leg on the stairs that led downward.

The Masked Rider fired. His bullet punched into the flesh of Big Jim's thigh. The banker howled as he dropped to a knee, his Colts falling. The black cloak fell away revealing his black suit.

"I surrender!" he mumbled

He pushed himself up to sag against the side of the safe. Then a double-barreled .41 derringer came out of his vest pocket as the Masked Rider began to lower his smoking .45s.

The Masked Rider flung his empty right-hand gun. It caught Big Jim across the bridge of the nose, smashing it. And the masked man was on him as he swayed, to knock the derringer from his hand.

"Senor—Senor, you are here?" Blue Hawk had come gliding in.

"Help me get this snake out!" the Masked Rider called to him.

CHAPTER XV

Terror No Longer

THE Masked Rider and Blue Hawk got Big Jim through the little swing door in the railing, started to turn to the back door. Some instinct warned Blue Hawk. He glanced over his shoulder.

"S e n o r—*cuidado*—behind you, Senor—look out!"

The Masked Rider wheeled. The wounded Corlee, on his knees, was leveling a hogleg across the railing. The Masked Rider threw up his left-hand gun and pulled the trigger. There was only the hollow click of the hammer on empty shells. He threw himself sideward as he thumbed a fresh cartridge from his belt under the black cloak. He knew there wouldn't be time though.

There was a soft whispering sound in the now quiet bank. A silver shaft arrowed through the moonlight at Corlee—the Yaqui's knife. Red Corlee had to

duck down again, and when he came up for another try further down the rail, the Masked Rider had that shell in his gun.

He fired. That time it was no mere creasing of the scalp. The bullet crashed and Corlee never felt himself hit the floor.

Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider turned and continued toward the back door with Big Jim between them.

The ailing town marshal, Siderman, who had dragged himself out of a sick bed, was in charge outside now. He had a hastily organized posse of citizens he had picked up en route. They had the Black Bunch herded over against the crates. Another doctor, a man called Miller, was patching up the wounded.

Out front a mob of townspeople were roaring for Big Jim Danners as word reached them he had been riding as the Masked Rider, in robbing his own bank. The wagon with the bank funds, driven by Marie Burns, came swinging back.

There was no need for a confession by Danners, or any of them. The deadwood was hung on them all for fair. Robbing his own bank was enough to put Danners away for a long time.

The Masked Rider stood over him as he sat on a box while the doctor tied up the wounded thigh temporarily.

"You staged the bank robbery to cover the embezzlement of funds you stole to finance the B-J Land Syndicate, didn't you?" he asked sternly.

Big Jim, all his bluster gone now, nodded. Then he began to talk.

"A confession might save me from the rope, mightn't it, Siderman?" he asked.

The Masked Rider took over. "How about Doc Felkes? One of those gunslicks you hired as bank guards stabbed him to death at your orders, didn't he?"

"No, no! I—I just told him to give him a beating up as a warning. But the Doc tried for a gun in a drawer, the guard told me. So—"

The town marshal shrugged. "That ain't a-goin' to sound convincin' to a jury."

Slumped over, a broken man, Big Jim talked some more, giving the details, filling in the gaps. He admitted that his brother Joe had been masquerading as the Masked Rider and led the Black Bunch.

"Figure yuh're pretty smart, don't yuh, Danners?" accused the marshal. "Supposin' yuh'd got away with it, grabbed all El Toro. Folks'd found out right soon that the B-J Land Syndicate was you. Then they'd come for yore neck. Naw, Danners. Yuh never could of won out!"

"That so? I—" The bank president caught himself.

"If you get into the B-J outfit's files, Marshal, you'll find the answer," said the Masked Rider.

"Yes, I suppose you'd find out anyway," Danners growled. "I might as well tell you I had a contract with the St. Louis Pioneering Company—they send out settlers. They were going to take the whole thing off my hands when I had control. Then I'd take the pay-off *dinero* and quit the country."

"Yuh dirty sidewinder!" growled Wimmel. "Why didn't you kill him, Masked Rider, when yuh had the chance?"

The Masked Rider smiled. "I can't shoot a down man to death, Wimmel. But don't worry. Even if he beats the rope with all the charges against him, Jim Danners will undoubtedly get life. And for him that'll be living death, believe me."

He turned as Marie Burns in her man's clothing came over, eyes glowing.

"You were wonderful! You swung this whole thing and broke them!" She rose on tiptoe and kissed him flush on the lips.

"Yeah, the Masked Rider walked right into the hornet's nest of 'em and flushed 'em out, gettin' the top ones in the deal!" Wimmel said heartily. "He shore did!" He wrung the Masked Rider's hand.

THEN Ab Pencer and the town marshal and others were crowding around the man who had exposed the bogus Masked Rider and broken the Black Bunch. It was minutes before he could break away. Then he strode back to the bank on a piece of unfinished business.

In front of the desk, Butch Burns had

partially regained consciousness. He was moaning, mouthing disconnected phrases.

"Get me—get preacher—dyin'."

The Masked Rider knelt beside him, struck a match, and inspected the bullet gash on the side of his head. It was just a flesh wound. A bullet had touched his skull and knocked him temporarily unconscious. The Masked Rider picked him up in his powerful arms and carried him out the back door. When he laid him on the grass, the doctor came over. The Masked Rider whispered to him.

Nodding, Dr. Miller bent over Butch Burns. Marie had come over as had the town marshal. Again Burns mumbled something about a preacher, but consciousness was returning now. The doctor inspected the wound, spoke soberly.

"Too bad—cut down in the prime of life like this. But there's nothing a doctor can do when the skull is pierced."

Butch Burns pushed his eyes open. "My Gawd, there ain't a chance?" His bloodshot eyes bugged when Miller nodded. "Get me a preacher," he begged.

"Reckon there ain't time."

The Masked Rider bent low over Burns. "You don't want to face eternity with sin on your soul, Burns? Like that will?"

"The will! Oh—oh, my head . . . I'm goin' fast. Yes, the will. I wrote it. Galt and Doc Felkes were witnesses. My old man was sinking so fast he didn't know what he was signin'. In his real will, he left everything to Marie. I admit it . . . How much longer have I got, Doc?"

"Oh well, I'll clean out that scalp wound and you'll probably live many a long year—behind bars," the doctor told him coldly.

Burns sat up, cursing. But it was too late. Too many, including the local law, had already heard his confession. Marie was crying. The Masked Rider patted her shoulder, smiled and moved off.

He slipped into the cottonwoods, around behind the trees that flanked the creek bank. Crossing an open lot, he cut behind a log butcher shop, then emerged on the side road up beyond the throng. He had picked up the black stallion, Midnight, from where he had left the animal groundhitched back of the trees. He mounted and rode toward the edge of the town to where Blue Hawk had had the stallion and the black rig waiting before. From under a thicket he took out another bundle of clothes and tossed aside the cloak of the Masked Rider.

Back behind the bank, Blue Hawk picked big gloomy-faced Swede Sweeny out of the pack of Black Bunch prisoners.

"Got a little matter to settle with this hombre," he told one of the possemen.

He led the big-bellied outlaw into the cottonwoods. Quickly Blue Hawk cut the rawhide thongs that bound Sweeny's wrists. The man stood goggle-eyed.

"Don't ask me any questions," Blue Hawk said. "Back behind these cottonwoods are a couple of the horses I stampeded off. Grab one and ride swiftly, Sweeny. Ride home and see those two boys of yours."

SWEENY could hardly speak. "Gawd bless yuh, Injun!" he finally croaked. "Yuh're one swell hombre!"

"Go!" Blue Hawk gave him a push.

He stepped back out of the cottonwoods and mixed in with the others as Wayne Morgan came ambling around the corner in his hickory shirt and gray pants.

"What the devil happened to yuh, Morgan?" Ab Pencer bellowed. "Yuh're never around when yuh're needed."

Wayne Morgan shrugged. "I got lost somehow, scoutin' around out there at the edge of the town. When I heard the gunnin', I started in."

Pencer, irate, wagged a finger at him. "You're fired, Morgan! Yore friend, the Masked Rider, carried off this job and—"

"Where in tarnation is he, that Masked Rider?" Mike Wimmel put in.

Morgan shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I was thinkin' of moseyin' along anyway, Pencer."

"That'll be no loss!" Pencer fired back. "But I wonder where that Masked Rider *could* have gone to?"

Behind them, Blue Hawk stood, face impassive, but his dark eyes were twinkling with mirth.

Dodge City Guns

By TOM CURRY

To deal death to a rustler chief and to recover a stolen herd —these aims kept Vern Lewis on a path of vengeance!

CHAPTER I

Raid

DUSTY, weary from the long drive up the Jones and Plummer Trail from Texas, nursing five thousand ornery, stubborn cows, Vern Lewis strained forward in his saddle for first sight of the wild and woolly town of Dodge City.

Close to the broad-shouldered, power-

ful waddy cantered his iron-gray boss, Hal Keeney, who paid Lewis forty a month, furnishing grub and ammunition, for which Vern held himself ready to fight and die for the H K spread. He was prepared, whenever called on to make that play, to face leaden death from murderous enemy guns.

In the group with Lewis and the bluff, hearty Keeney were half a dozen other H K punchers who had borne the brunt of that thousand-mile exodus from home range to railhead market. They licked their lips and exchanged anticipatory remarks concerning the sport they meant to have in town, for in that year of 1877 Dodge City was wide open, and with every facility for entertaining the changing, colorful crowds from the Trail.

Lewis wore thick leather chaps over dark pants; his half boots were spurred with silver; over his blue shirt, a dust-kerchief was reversed around his brown neck, which beat with the pulse of youthful blood. On curly light hair was cocked a ten-gallon gray Stetson the boss had given him as a present when they started north. In his right holster rode his cherished .45 Frontier Model Colt six-shooter.

With that gun, Lewis daily practised to keep his hand in. And in the keenness of his young face and his light-blue gunfighter's eyes was the impression that they were never glazed with fear nor blanched with panic.

It was great to be away, at last, he was thinking, from the smell of the cattle, the clogging dust, the grinding monotony.

The mustang hoofs thudded hollowly as they crossed the toll bridge over the Arkansas River and trotted into Dodge City, Keeney in the lead. North of the railroad tracks, the main town showed in all its glory. In the July sun, Dodge City baked there on the prairie. Dust caked everything.

Front Street ran east and west. Turning off Bridge Street, they paraded along the plaza, lined with stores and saloons and jammed with hitched teams and saddle mounts. Plank walks and wooden awnings ran from building line to roadside posts, with continuous hitch-rails and shaded benches. Here and there stood a

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Lewis swayed in the saddle as the horse lunged sideways toward the rail

AN ACTION NOVELET

whisky barrel, filled to the brim with water, for protection against fires so easily started in a town whose structures were dry wood.

A TALL, handsome man with a flowing frontier mustache, his massive head crowned by a high black Stetson, black pants hanging outside fancy half boots, and with a chief marshal's silver badge on his white shirt, stepped from a shaded walk. The incoming cowmen could see the extra length of the Colt at his hip. The barrel was a foot long, instead of the standard seven-and-a-half inches. He raised a hand high, and as Keeney pulled up, wiping sweat-caked dust from his shadowed face, the officer spoke politely but firmly.

"Gents," he told them, "you'll have to check your guns at the store or saloon. Town ordinance."

The marshal stood well over six feet. Mature and self-possessed, he had broad shoulders, slim hips, and a real man's eyes.

"Why, dang your sandpaper hide, you old horned-toad, Wyatt!" Hal Keeney yelled. "Heard you were keepin' 'em in line here. Put her there!"

He flung himself off his horse, sticking out his big hand.

"Glad to see you, Hal," greeted the marshal. "Didn't know yuh with all that dust on. Come have a drink. We'll go to Bat's."

"Fine." Keeney swung on his men, bawled: "Meet Wyatt Earp, boys, the squarest and best shooter in the U.S. Now enjoy yourselves, but don't get into trouble, savvy? Check your belt guns as the marshal says and behave or I'll run you to the calaboose myself!"

The cowboys split up, going to eat or into saloons. Vern Lewis trailed his boss and Wyatt Earp into the Lone Star Dance Hall.

"Bat Masterson owns half this place," he heard the marshal say.

Earp and Keeney stepped up to the long bar and ordered. The bartender gave Keeney and Lewis checks for their guns. No man who was under the weather could reclaim his pistol either. This was designed to keep down the city's murder rate.

Lewis stayed near the entry, enjoying a drink and the sights in the saloon, with its gaming tables and music. The swinging door banged in, struck hard by the calloused paw of a huge man with a blunt, reddened face, who wore gaudy cowboy garb. He had had plenty of red-eye, and his dark eyes showed his ugly mood. His hand slapped his hip, close to a gun-butt. His thick lips working as he muttered a curse, his eyes fixed on Lewis, lounging against the bar.

Lewis' clean-cut, clear-eyed appearance seemed to irritate him. Plainly he was hunting for trouble. He came closer, jutting jaw struck out toward the cowpuncher.

"Since when did they serve yearlings not dry behind the ears?" he snarled. "I heard Dodge was a Sunday school town and I'm here to reform her back to a man's hangout." His elbow dug deep into Lewis' ribs. "G'wan, start dustin', button!"

The gunman's act was without provocation, a manifestation of vile humor. Almost by instinct Vern's hand dropped to his holster—only to find it empty. The giant seized this movement to whip out his right-hand pistol and ram it into Lewis' middle.

"So, pup, you dare try to draw on Bull Martin!"

Big as Vern Lewis was he could move with amazing speed. Dodging cows and his own natural ability had made him as fast on his feet as any trained boxer. His left hand flew up, sweeping "Bull" Martin's six-gun to the ceiling. The Colt boomed, the hot blast so close to his ear, it made his eardrum ring, but the slug plugged into the top of the mirror behind the bar.

And with the same movement, Vern Lewis' hard, doubled right fist, driven from his shoulder traveling in a short, snappy arc, smashed with terrific force against Martin's heavy jaw.

The smack of knuckle against bone

sounded like an echo of the shot. Lewis had hold of Martin's right wrist, and his fingers were like a steel circlet. The huge gunman struggled helplessly to free his pistol. He wanted to kill Lewis. Water started in Bull Martin's red-rimmed eyes from the punch and he kept working his injured jaw as a trickle of blood ran down his bearded chin.

"Check those guns, Martin, both of 'em!" a stern voice snapped.

Martin turned his head to scowl into Marshal Earp's long, set face. The officer had drawn no gun, but there was menace in his cold eyes.

LEWIS let go of his enemy, and the infuriated giant turned upon Earp with a bellow of rage. Vern Lewis slapped the man's gun arm again, spoiling his aim. And it was then that Marshal Earp swung his Colt. The long barrel clanked heavily against Bull Martin's forehead. The gun-man's knees buckled and he fell with a crash to the sawdust.

Earp bent over, removed both the man's pistols, shoved them to the bartender.

"Don't give 'em back till he's over his celebration," he ordered.

A handsome youthful man with a well brushed, drooping mustache and straight hair neatly parted at the side, ran from the rear. "What's wrong, Wyatt?"

"This young feller just gave Bull Martin as pretty a lesson as yuh'd care to see," Earp drawled, indicating Lewis, and nodding to Lewis and Hal Keeney, he added: "Meet Bat Masterson. Come have a drink, Bat. You, too, cowboy. I like your nerve."

"Wait'll I toss out this garbage," Masterson growled. He seized Martin by the shirt collar and dragged him out the door. Bull Martin was coming back to life, rubbing a dirty hand across his face.

"And don't return till you can act like a gent, you cattle thief," Bat bawled.

Hal Keeney laughed, slapped Vern Lewis' back. "You got the spunk I like to see, Vern," he complimented. "But watch hombres like that. They're bad medicine. Likely to shoot you in the back some dark night."

Wyatt's face was grave. "That's good advice," he said. "Bull's a tough customer, Vern. But you had to defend yoreself."

The praise from the men he so admired made Lewis flush. Everybody was staring at him, and he felt self-conscious at the murmurs of congratulation. He was glad to leave Masterson's place to hear Keeney interview the agent who had offered to buy the H K steers.

Lewis wanted to learn all details of the cow business, for with his wages he had bought a small section which he hoped some day to stock, and start out as a rancher for himself. There was a girl back at the home ranch, too, Keeney's youngest daughter. She and Vern Lewis had an understanding.

Two hours later a crowd was hanging around the store where the agent, Peter Jennings, usually held forth. Bull Martin was there, also, now fully recovered. He leaned against a rail and scowled at Lewis. The cattle buyer was sitting on a box, using another box, in front of him, as a desk.

"Our blanket camp's across the toll bridge, just two miles to the south," Keeney was explaining to Jennings. "You'll see our wagon with the H K brand painted on it."

"I'll be out first thing in the mornin'," promised the agent. "Got several herds to look over today, Keeney."

"All right."

Finishing his business, the boss hooked an arm through Vern Lewis' arm.

"That'll fix us fine, Vern," he said. "Good price now and the old outfit sure can use it. Been a long trail and last year's drought was no help. Comin' back to camp with me now, or later on with Shorty and the boys? They'll be playin' her high, spendin' all their pay."

"I'll go with you, boss." Lewis had a good reason to save his money. He was remembering the couple of dozen head of prime beefs he had in the herd himself. So he gladly accompanied Keeney back to their blanket camp, southwest of Dodge City.

For miles around, after they crossed

the river, the plains were covered with grazing cattle, driven up the Trail to market. Dust thickened the air like a haze.

IT WAS dusk when they pulled up to their camp, and the H K punchers who had been left there hailed them joyfully. They had been holding the big herd all afternoon. Keeney let three more go on to town, just keeping a skeleton crew to bed down the animals for the night.

"You get some sleep, Vern," ordered the boss. "I'll wake you when I'm ready to turn in."

Lewis rolled himself in his blanket, under the chuckwagon.

From peaceful slumber, dreaming of Lucy Keeney and his own ranch with a pretty young wife at his side, Vern Lewis started awake to the blasting roar of guns in the night. He leaped up so suddenly he nearly banged his brains out on a wagon spring. The star-studded sky beamed milkily, a small slice of silver moon giving a faint light.

Stampede!

Dust was rising up thick as a wall. Lewis could make out only shadows, wild Apache figures flying past, shooting from the saddles, blue flashes spitting from guns. He grabbed up his Colt, sear filed away, so that he needed but to jerk the hammer back under a long thumb to fire it. Starting out he tried to make something of the bedlam, distinguish friend from foe. A man screamed and a wild mustang Lewis recognized as an H K mount, dragging a dying puncher, ran past the wagon.

"Boss!" Lewis yelled frantically. "Boss!"

"This way, Vern!" he heard Keeney bellow, from the other side of the wagon. "This way! Rustlers!"

Keeney's cry was suddenly cut off. Lewis ducked under the wagon body, saw two riders looming in the night, hazy in the dusty gloom, just swinging back to the running herd.

Lewis nearly tripped on his boss' body, stretched on the dirt, gun in limp hand. Stooping by his beloved friend, a pang of anguish shot through his heart, thinking what he would have to tell Lucy and the other women back home. He saw the pain-racked face, the dark blotch that was blood welling from Hal Keeney's lips.

Cursing, Lewis rose up, took aim at the receding horsemen, fired once, twice. One of them leaped up from his seat with a strident howl, slapping at his hip. The second man, a giant, shadowed figure protected by his mate, whirled. His guns spat at Vern Lewis.

Lead buzzed past Lewis. A slug creased his leg through his chaps and he gritted his teeth at the pain, trying to get a clean shot at the enemy. Another bullet sent dust stinging into the young cowboy's eyes. As he wiped it out so he could aim, he heard the big hombre who had shot at him bellow:

"There he is—by the wagon! Get him!"

More riders swirled in on Lewis. As his next shot struck the big fellow's horse, the pony collapsed. But the concerted fire of the rustlers bore upon Lewis. He heard several slugs slap into the wagon—then blackness suddenly descended and he folded up on top of Hal Keeney.

CHAPTER II

Arrested

WHEN Lewis came back to life, he found "Shorty," the H K foreman, bending over him, bathing his face with water.

"All right, Vern?" growled Shorty.

"Yeah. But"—Lewis was afraid to ask but he had to—"how's Keeney?"

"Bad hurt. Scared he'll die, though I can't say for sure. Got a slug right under the heart. I sent him to town pronto."

"Anybody else?" Lewis asked tightly.

"They killed Bing and Harry. Others all wounded, most of 'em cut up bad by hoofs. I sent 'em in with the boss. You were lucky. That crease across your scalp'll heal in a few days. Good you took it quick and was laid out or they'd have

finished you. The wagon kept the steers from tramplin' you."

Lewis' head was splitting. Gingerly he touched the spot where the pain was worst, and he felt cloth, for Shorty had already bandaged the wound.

Day had come, but the sky showed no red, for the wind had veered, blowing gray cloud shapes across the low heavens. Lewis shivered, not from cold but from icy dread over the fate of Keeney and Lewis' own comrades.

"Where's the herd, Shorty?" he asked.

"Gone. Them rustlers took every one."

Lewis leaped up hotly. "What's that? Come on! Let's follow them."

"Don't be a fool. How can you trail hoofs when there's a million such marks on the plains. Every cow in the U. S. has boudoired around here and we can't even guess which way those wide-loopers took, they're so cut up. We rode back after celebratin' all night. Dang it, why'd we stay so long? But we never figured on rustler trouble so close to Dodge, at the end of the Trail. The boss and you were here with the others, wounded and losin' blood. The thieves got away hours ago."

Lewis stared about him. In the gloomy skies dust clouds joined to make visibility worse. All around, in the near distance, other herds were being driven up the Trail to market. Shifting dry dirt between the trampled, tough-fibered grass showed millions on millions of hoofmarks, just as Shorty had said.

"Then the boss is ruined every which way," growled Lewis, and he might have added, "Me, too," but he was not thinking of himself.

"Seems so," Shorty sadly agreed. "But get yourself some coffee, and take it easy. Nothin' we can do."

The H K camp was a wreck. Strangers in a strange land, the few survivors picked up what scattered belongings they could find and rode sorrowfully into Dodge City. Vern Lewis' favorite horse had been driven off among others in the bunch by the thieves, and he had to mount double with Shorty. Arriving in town, the men went to ask what the doctor had to say about Keeney and their cowboy friends.

Shorty's poker face never changed, as, hat brim rolled in stubby fingers, he faced the boys after the interview.

"No change," he reported gruffly. "Doc claims he can't tell yet. Now behave yourselves. I'm goin' to see the sheriff, find can he do anything for us."

Lewis, heart aching, tagged along. He wanted to fight, to help his boss, his outfit. But there was nothing tangible for him to seize upon.

Sheriff Charlie Bassett of Ford County was not yet in his office across the tracks, where stood the calaboose, but they found him breakfasting at home. At Shorty's sad yarn he shook his head.

"Cowboy," he said, kindly, "I'm sure sorry. I know your boss and he's a square-shooter. But there's not a chance to trail stolen cows in these parts, not with the land cut up as it is and the long start those varmints got on you. Sellin' 'em is awful easy, too, with so many buyers in town."

"Sheriff," Vern Lewis cut in, "I believe that gang was led by Bull Martin."

Bassett frowned. "Wouldn't be surprised. Are you sure you spotted Martin?"

"It was too dark to see faces, Sheriff, and I only met Bull once. But I think it was him."

"Can you swear to him in court?"

LEWIS scratched his tow head. "Pretty near."

"H'm. You'd have to swear positive. And even if you did—well, he's a clever snake, and has plenty crooked pards. If you could catch him with the evidence, that'd be the only way. I'll see what I can do for you, but I haven't got much hope."

Vern and Shorty thanked him and strolled along the wooden walk, under the continuous awning.

"Don't look so good," sighed the foreman. "Well, I'll go swallow two fingers of red-eye and see if it'll brighten the world some. Comin', Vern?"

Lewis shook his head. He was restless and hanging over a bar would not help him. After Shorty left, he walked about

town, unable to stay still.

It was afternoon when his roving eyes glimpsed Bull Martin's broad back as the giant went up the steps into a saloon. Lewis quickened his pace and, pausing outside on the walk, looked in to see Martin at the bar. The giant was drinking with several friends who seemed in fine spirits, for they were toasting one another and laughing.

In obedience to Marshal Earp's ordinance, Lewis had again checked his pistol, so his holster was empty. Martin wore both six-shooters, as did his friends, defying the order. A wave of rage swept Vern Lewis at sight of the leering bully. He was morally certain that Bull Martin was responsible for the H K's ruin.

Hurrying to pick up his gun, he went back to the saloon where Martin stood. Hotly he burst into the place, and Martin swung, staring into the muzzle of Lewis' drawn Colt.

"What's up?" he gasped. A yellow look showed under his red skin.

"What've you done with those H K steers you stole last night, dang your dirty hide!" growled Lewis.

The instant the barkeeper had seen Lewis enter with a drawn six-shooter, he had edged to an open window. He whistled shrilly.

Bull Martin's eyes fixed the stern H K rider, calculatingly. He would have gone for his own weapon had he dared, but neither he nor his friends would take a chance, under that steady Colt muzzle.

"What do you mean, sayin' I stole your cows?" snarled Martin.

"You know. You almost killed my boss. Then you ran off our herd."

"One moment!" ordered a stern voice from the door.

Lewis swung. As he took his eyes off Martin and his cronies for that single instant, a tough hombre behind Bull Martin flashed out his pistol. But Vern Lewis had already whirled back, hearing the click of the cocked weapon. The two guns seemed to blast together, but Lewis was only spattered by splinters as his enemy's bullet plugged into the floor at his wide-spread feet, while the tough hombre suddenly dropped his pistol, gripping a punctured forearm, cursing furiously.

"Nice shot, Vern," Wyatt Earp said quietly, from the doorway.

Bat Masterson, deputy marshal of Dodge City, though Lewis had not known that before, dashed up to reinforce Earp. But the tall chief marshal now took charge of the brawl himself.

"This crazy galoot stuck a gun on me!" shouted Bull Martin angrily. "He accuses me of stealin' his outfit's cows. He's a liar and if there's any law in Dodge, Earp, you'll arrest him!"

"Marshal," Lewis said coolly, "last night this big sidewinder shot my boss and drove off our herd."

"He lies!" howled Martin.

"Put up your guns, all of you," ordered Earp. As law officer of Dodge he could not favor anyone. Sternly he went on, addressing Martin and his crew: "I've warned you over and over against wearin' your hardware north of the tracks. You're comin' to court now. Lay your guns on the bar, every man of you. You, too, Vern."

Lewis shrugged as he complied. The gang also obeyed, cowed by Earp and Masterson.

"Huh," sneered Martin. "I see you favor your pards, Earp."

A dark flush spread under Earp's high-boned cheeks. "I carry out the law of Dodge City," he said icily. "Vern, I'll have to take you in for that gunplay. And Martin, come on—your friends with you."

BULL MARTIN cursed Lewis, but gave up his guns and led the parade. With Vern Lewis bringing up the rear, they walked in the center of the road, with the officers behind them. Across the Santa Fe tracks stood the courthouse. A judge was sitting and, lined before the bench, Bull Martin and his friends were fined fifty dollars apiece for toting guns in town.

Martin paid their fines, insolently

throwing down the cash from a huge roll of bills. But Vern Lewis, having only five dollars on him, had to plead poverty.

"Thirty days in the calaboose," the judge told him.

Martin laughed till the tears ran down his hard face. He slapped his thigh as he cackled:

"That'll teach you, sonny!"

"But Judge," cried Lewis, "this big coyote rustled our cows."

"*Hmm!*" the judge growled. "Rustling's a serious charge."

"Ten years in state prison," Wyatt Earp observed.

"He lies like sixty, Yore Honor," Bull Martin asserted, and shot a quick glance at one of his friends. "Look here, Blackie —where was I last night, when this polecat claims I was rustlin', huh?"

The dark-faced, saturnine hombre called "Blackie" spoke up. "Bull was playin' poker with me all night, Judge. Four of us can swear to that."

"Any other proof, Vern?" Earp asked.

"No-o," Lewis replied reluctantly. "Only I thought—"

"Dismissed," the judge snapped. "Your say-so on what you think won't hold water, cowboy. But Martin, if I see you in here again I'll sure slap you heavy, savvy?"

Martin's yellow-stained fangs showed in triumph. He swaggered close to Lewis as he left the room.

"I'll blow your lyin' tongue out of your head when you get out of jail," he promised.

The infuriated Lewis leaped at him. Earp intervened.

"Get along, Martin," the marshal snapped.

The giant laughed. "All right," he said, and shrugged. "But—tables always turn, Earp."

When the gunmen had left, Earp turned back to the dejected Lewis. The marshal drew out some money and paid the cowboy's fine.

"Now let's hear all about it, Vern," he ordered. "I had to haul you in, so as to be fair."

"I know," Lewis told him.

He repeated his story of woe. Earp sadly shook his head.

"More to it than just the rustlin', Vern. Tough luck I ever let Bull see me hobnob with Hal Keeney. Bull hates me plenty. I don't doubt he struck your boss and shot you up as a hit at me and to even up on you for smackin' him down. It's happened before to friends of mine. Martin won't shoot it out with me like a man, but he'd put a slug through your back if he saw a chance."

"Then you don't think the boss' herd can be found?"

"Nope. What Sheriff Bassett says is true. You can't spot a few thousand cows among the multitudes driven to Dodge. Martin has his hideouts, his crooked friends. We know he's a rustler, but we've never been able to take him right. He'll blotch your brand, destroy your earmarks, sell the steers cheap, spot cash. Tough on Keeney; but there's so much doin' in Dodge we can only police the town to take care of out-and-out crimes done before witnesses. I'll keep my eye open, though."

"Martin and that Blackie were in the crowd yesterday when the boss told the cattle buyer where our camp was," Lewis said thoughtfully. "I saw 'em myself."

"No doubt. And you prob'ly saw Bull in the dust last night, but he's got an iron-clad alibi. You're free, anyway, Vern."

Vern Lewis looked out. Martin and his friends stood on the street, further down, watching the courthouse.

"Where's the cells?" he asked.

Wyatt's brows rose in surprise.

"What do you mean? They're up above here, reached by an outside stairs."

"Put me in one," Lewis said quickly. "Bull will think I'm out of circulation for a few days then. Let me go free at dark. Will you just keep an eye on Martin till evenin'?"

Wyatt Earp studied the determined young face. He smiled, slapped Lewis' back. "Sure. You're not a quitter, are you?"

"Never. Not while I'm kickin'."

The marshal took his arm, for show, pushed him outside and up a flight of wooden steps to the lock-up. Bull Martin and his pards guffawed as they saw the door close on Vern Lewis.

CHAPTER III

Clay Allison of Las Animas

VERN LEWIS watched the wild scene that was Dodge City. To his ears came the raucous sounds of cursing teamsters, the yells of men in saloons and honkytonks as darkness closed in. Marshal Earp had come to let him out of the calaboose, and tell him where Martin was.

Opposite the saloon where earlier he had clashed with the giant rustler, Lewis could look through the window at the side and see the gunman with his cronies, playing poker. The H K cowboy waited, resting his weight first on one foot, then the other. It was infuriating to see the hombre who had shot Keeney, and ruined the H K, free to do as he liked. Lewis was more positive than ever that Bull Martin had led that night raid.

The bulldog strain in Lewis made him hold on. He racked his brain for the answer. The law couldn't help him.

"Up to me," he muttered, fists tight. He regretted having gone off half-cocked against Martin, since he had only exposed his hands to the burly outlaw.

He hoped the rustlers would believe him still in jail, however.

He toyed with the pleasant notion of catching Martin across the dead line, and shooting it out. But that would not bring back the H K herd. And down in Texas, waiting for him, hoping, was Lucy Keeney.

"Just can't go back and tell her we lost out," he mumbled.

A hullabaloo rose from the south end of town, and a crowd of cowboys, hilarious after long weeks of restraint on the trail, came galloping full-tilt across the toll bridge and tracks and swung into Front Street, firing their guns.

Marshal Earp hustled out, raised his hand. Bat Masterson and Charlie Bassett, the sheriff, posted themselves so there could be no ambush.

Bull Martin and his gang came out on the saloon porch, and Vern Lewis stayed in the shadows to the side.

"Check those guns, boys!" Earp bellowed to the yelling cowboys.

"Tell him to go jump in the creek!" yelled Martin. "The town's yours, gents. Paint her red, white and blue!"

Lewis edged closer as Earp swung around and called:

"Check your guns, too, Martin. What did I tell you?"

"We're leavin' town," snarled Bull Martin.

"Then ride," ordered Earp. He made a motion toward Martin but the giant rustler swung for his horse and mounted.

"Maybe he's on his way to take care of our cows," Vern Lewis decided, his heart jumping. And again he mumbled: "It's up to me."

Lewis did not believe such a big herd could have been driven far. The thieves probably worked only at night. Bull Martin could have run the H K steers to a rendezvous, then hurried back to Dodge City.

Lewis obtained his gun and located Shorty's saddle horse with its H K brand. Shorty was not around and Vern Lewis was in a rush. He mounted and rode on Bull Martin's trail, out of Dodge City across the Arkansas River, the bunch of thieves ahead in the gloom. Riders were coming and going on the road and Lewis could track his men from a distance.

They headed south, struck the edge of the wider trail, vague in outline, and hundreds of yards across, as the herds were driven so they might find grass on the way. Ruby fires glowed here and there on the plains, and other outfits, luckier than the H K, were holding their cattle apart from each other, thousands of steers.

Vern Lewis held the chestnut mustang back. Even though it was dark he dared

not press too close, for fear he might be spotted. And that must not happen, because his greatest hope was that Martin would lead him to the rustled cows.

The outlaw gang he followed trotted on but a few miles, then veered southwest. They dismounted at a fire built among a stone patch in the low bush, evidently a meeting place, for Lewis saw that three tough-looking hombres were already there.

LEWIS left his horse well back and crept in. Flat on his lean belly he watched the light rays play on Martin's ugly countenance. The big rustler was cursing Wyatt Earp, and Lewis kept his ears open, hoping mention would be made of the H K.

"Pass that jug," Bull Martin growled at last. "We got a long night ahead, gents, and I need fortification."

"What's the hurry?" Blackie asked. "The later we get out there, the more the boys'll have done."

"You lazy dog! We want to get those cows off our hands quick. You may have no use for money, but I have. Besides, Earp's on his ear. That feller Lewis told him he saw me at the raid. Earp's pinin' to catch me dead to rights and I don't aim to oblige him."

Lewis was excited. Bull was talking of the H K cows now. The cowboy was sure of it! But before any more definite allusion came, galloping hoofs sounded from the trail and the rustlers ceased their talk as a man swung in to their fire, riding right up to the circle cast by it.

He was on a great, milk-white stallion, and he was a tall broad fellow with an aquiline nose, flaring nostrils, and a haughty expression on his handsome face. Black pants and frock coat, a ruffled white shirt, a wide black Stetson completed his clothing. Fancy six-shooters rode at his hips; a rifle nestled in a saddle holster under his leg. He dismounted, dropped his horse's reins and, arms akimbo, faced Bull Martin.

"And who," he demanded coldly, "are you?"

"For gosh sakes," growled Martin, astounded at this effrontery. "If anybody had told me any hombre in this country would ride up to a gent's fire and ask who he is, I'd have called him a liar!"

"Are you callin' me a liar, sir?" the stranger said icily, and on the instant both those fancy guns were in his hands, moving in an arc to cover Martin and his whole gang.

Bull Martin swore hotly. The stranger waited till he ran down, then said:

"I see you're all yellow. You folks must be Dodge City citizens. I aim to clean up that town of no-goods or my name isn't Clay Allison of Las Animas!" He said that last boastfully, as if he wanted it known that he did not have to wait to be asked before shouting out his name.

Martin's pards, angry at the nerve of this impudent stranger who had ridden in and insulted them without provocation, had been stealthily moving their hands toward their guns. In their minds the stranger needed a killing. Martin himself was watching for a chance to draw and shoot. But Clay Allison's next move discouraged that. Having announced his name, he whipped up both fancy guns and, as though it were a warning, fired a shot that whistled within an inch of Martin's ear.

"Hold it!" bawled Martin, as his hands shot skyward. "Allison, we're friends. Don't shoot, boys! Clay's okay."

Allison held the drop, staring at the ugly rustler. "And who gave you permission to call me friend, wart-face?" he asked.

Vern Lewis watched breathlessly. He knew Clay Allison by name, as a dangerous gunman and killer; a hero to some persons, a villain to others. The whole West talked of Allison's deeds. But he was more worried now at this interruption than about Allison's reputation. For he feared it would turn Martin away from his purpose of going to see about the H K herd.

"Easy," begged Martin. "I don't like the goody-goodies in Dodge any more than

you do, Clay Allison. Sit down. Have some grub and liquor?"

ALLISON shrugged, sat down and let Bull ply him with a pan of stew, biscuits and bottle of whisky. But the two talked together in such low tones that Lewis could not hear what they were saying. Finally Martin rose and told his men:

"Mr. Allison's come all the way from his home town to call that skunk Earp's bluff. He and I think just alike. I'm addin' a thousand dollars to the standin' offer we posted for any hombre who kills the marshal. When are you makin' your play, Clay, huh?"

"When I'm ready," the desperado drawled.

"Blackie," snapped Martin. "I'm ridin' back to Dodge with Clay. Take the boys and finish that job pronto, savvy? Get going. Make sure you ain't trailed and tell Dinny I'll see him tomorrow."

Blackie growled assent. The men mounted and rode off west, lining out. Allison and Martin polished off the whisky, heads together. Then Clay Allison mounted his white horse and, with Bull Martin at his side, trotted toward Dodge City.

Vern Lewis, creeping back to his horse, was torn between desires. He wanted to warn Wyatt Earp that Allison was gunning for him, and he wanted to try to trail the rustlers. He was sure they were heading out now to finish blotching the brands on the H K cows. That was the first move, of course, though in order to dispose of them the rustlers must forge a bill of sale. But the brand must check, according to law, as well as the identifying earmarks.

Earp had been good to Lewis. Yet the cowboy did not believe Wyatt Earp needed anyone to protect him. Still, a warning would be a help. It was torture, trying to make a decision. Vern Lewis was almost glad when it was made for him.

The black shape of a horseman suddenly loomed upon him, spurring out from a clump of bush, whooping, firing a shot that passed through the crown of Lewis' Stetson. The H K man felt the slug's force as his horse leaped, rearing back on hind legs in alarm at the loud flash.

Lewis brought a fist down between the mustang's flattened ears to force him back into running position, and rolled his spurs. The big horse bounded forward, one heavy shoulder knocking the rustler's mount to its knees, and the man lost his saddle, sprawling on the ground, bawling loudly for help.

No doubt, thought Lewis, they had left this guard to make sure they were not being followed.

The gang had not gone far. At the sound of the guard's yells, they turned and galloped back.

Bullets began to sing over Vern Lewis' head as he jerked his rein and hustled north parallel to the trail, the pack whooping it up on his heels. They chased him to the bridge outside Dodge City, but his horse was fast and Lewis' pursuers were some distance behind him now. Only three of the men had clung to his trail.

The hoofs of the big horse thundered on the bridge. Lewis grabbed for his hat and missed as it blew off. There was no time to stop and get the Stetson now. Ahead a man on foot loomed into view, a six-gun in either hand.

"Stop!" the gunman shouted. "Looks as if those hombres behind you want you bad."

Lewis grabbed for his Colt. The two-gun man fired his left hand pistol. The bullet grazed Lewis' shirt and vest and he nearly fell out of the saddle as the big horse lunged sideways toward the bridge rail.

There was no doubt in Lewis' mind that the two-gun man was one of Martin's bunch. As the man aimed a second shot Lewis fired—and the gunslick dropped, a bullet in his heart.

The three rustlers who had been chasing Lewis had their guns ready at the far end of the bridge, but they suddenly wheeled their horses and rode away.

LEAVING the dead man sprawled in the shadows, Lewis rode back to the far end of the bridge and waited, hidden from view. In a few minutes two riders appeared and started across the bridge. Clay Allison, and the giant Bull Martin who was lost in admiration for the handsome murderous egotist who had a reputation of being a fellow who would shoot a man just to see him kick. Lewis trailed them at a safe distance, stopping to pick up his hat and put it on.

Along Bridge Street, across the Santa Fe tracks, which was the dead line drawn by the Dodge City marshals, they trotted past the station and west along the wide plaza of Front Street. It was brightly lighted, teeming in the night with shouting celebrating humanity.

Back in the shadows, Vern Lewis watched the two men picket their mounts. Then Clay Allison of Las Animas, the marshal-killer, swaggered to the Lone Star Dance Hall.

The place was filled with cowboys in from the trail, long-haired buffalo hunters, lean and fierce hombres who, with their dead-shot rifles, kept the railroad gangs supplied with steaks; gamblers in severe black; flashy, red-lipped women. The wooden walks were jammed. Horses stood by hundreds at hitch-rails and beneath the wooden awnings. Gloriously hilarious cowboys and soldiers whooped it up. In the dry air the dust rose like a haze. Conflicting strains of music that rose in a discord came from a dozen spots. And a play was going on at the opera house.

Martin was looking for Earp, who would be patrolling to prevent fights among the citizens and the visitors. The hunters who came there always considered themselves better men than the cowboys and the cowpunchers resented such an attitude; the soldiers hated both. Other famous marshals, Neal Brown the Cherokee breed, Billy Tilghman, Sheriff Bassett, Jim, Ed and Bat Masterson, were posted at strategic points. Below the tracks, the honkytonk district howled a wolfish refrain.

A man came from the Lone Star saloon, into which Clay Allison had swaggered shortly before. He looked up and down the road, then dashed for Second Avenue. Martin sneaked across the shadowy plaza, past the lines of horses. He ducked under the rail to the covered walk. Vern Lewis saw him take up a post in the darkness of the side alley on the west of the Lone Star.

Lewis found a hiding place at the other side and within a few minutes the man who had run from the Lone Star returned with Wyatt Earp. The tall marshal's long Colt rode at one hip; at his other was a standard Frontier Model Colt. In the crook of his arm was a double-barreled shotgun, useful in quieting a mob.

"Clay Allison's huntin' you," Lewis heard the messenger telling Wyatt Earp. "Says he'll shoot you on sight."

Earp was as cool as ever. So many desperadoes had "looked for" him—and found him! Lewis spoke from his hiding place in a low but clear whisper as Earp passed:

"Watch Allison. He's ridden in to kill you, and Bull Martin is hidden outside the window."

Earp nodded and went into the Lone Star. There was an open window close at hand and Lewis peered in at the scene. The big room cleared like magic as the marshal's tall figure strode in. Men took shelter behind the bar or ducked to the walls. Inside of two seconds all space between Clay Allison and the marshal was empty.

Allison left his drink to stare insolently into Earp's cold blue eyes.

"You're Earp?" he shouted hotly.

Wyatt Earp seeing that Clay Allison had only his pistols, leaned the shotgun against the wall.

"I'm Wyatt Earp," he replied quietly. "You have your pistols on. Check them with the house."

"Why, blast your unholy hide!" bawled Allison, taking a step toward the marshal. "You impudent hound! You've shot too many of my friends, Earp, and I've come to Dodge to settle. You'll never kill another pard of mine, savvy?"

CHAPTER IV

Bull Dog

IT WAS Earp's policy never to shoot unless a warning were given. Even then, the marshal preferred to humble a gunman by "buffaloing" him and dragging him to jail. Allison's violent tongue lashed Earp as he cursed in purple streaks.

"I have twenty-five scalps hung up," yelled the bandit, "and I'm makin' it twenty-six tonight!"

His right hip was turned to Earp so one holstered gun was not in the marshal's vision. Reviling Wyatt Earp, Allison's hand stealthily started for the hidden pistol but Earp's Colt was out with the rapidity of light, rammed into Clay Allison's ribs.

And, at the opposite window, Vern Lewis saw Bull Martin's twisted face as Martin thrust a six-gun barrel over the sill to shoot the marshal in the spine. Allison was waiting for Martin's play. He kept to the side so Bull Martin would have a clear range, but Earp, from Lewis' warning, guessed the game and pushed closer.

"I have an appointment across the tracks," Allison said airily. "But—this ain't over yet, Earp."

He walked off, leaving the marshal standing triumphant, in the middle of the room.

Lewis had his six-shooter out, hammer back under thumb. He threw it up and fired a hasty shot as Bull Martin, hate distorting his face, threw down on Earp's back. The rustler's pistol boomed but he was an instant later than Vern Lewis who had acted with the speed of coordinated muscles and brain kept clear by clean living and the strength of youth.

Lewis glimpsed a splotch of blood at the giant's ear as Martin went down out of sight like a jumping-jack. The explosions filled the saloon, and yells arose. Earp ran out on the porch. Allison was forking his white horse and the next instant was galloping south along Bridge Street. Bull Martin, a big paw to his ear, ran across the street and leaped into his saddle.

Vern Lewis was interested in following Martin. He started for his own mount, but as he hustled out of the alley a powerful arm suddenly gripped him around the throat.

"Let go!" cried Lewis.

A tall man with high cheekbones and eagle beak had him, and at one glance Lewis recognized the man. Neal Brown, Earp's Cherokee deputy.

"What's the idea, shootin' in that window at Earp?" growled Brown.

Wyatt came over. "He's a friend of mine, Neal. What happened, Vern?"

Lewis told him, and hurriedly finished: "I'm on Bull's trail—got to hustle."

They let him go and he hurried for his horse, but now Bull Martin was no longer in sight. Lewis scouted around but could find no trace of Martin, and he rode back, cursing, to the Lone Star.

Clay Allison came riding back full tilt, guns blaring, hurrahing the town, yelling death threats at Earp, who stood alone in the road.

"I'll get him this time!" Earp called to Deputy Marshal Brown. "Stay back! I'll handle him myself."

Slowly he raised the long Colt as Allison drew in. Hoping to stampede the marshal by Indian tactics, the desperado whooped closer but the sight of that steady pistol, known as the deadliest in all the West, broke him. He yanked hard on his reins, turned and went galloping full speed for the bridge, crossed the river and headed for home.

Vern Lewis, having lost Bull Martin, unable to pick up the big fellow's trail, went to Marshal Earp in the Lone Star. He told Earp what had occurred, during the chase of his enemy.

"I'm sorry," Earp said. "That was sort of my fault. I admire your spirit, Vern. You're persistent. But take my advice and stay clear of Bull. He'll kill you if he catches you right."

Vern Lewis shook his head. He was clutching at a final straw.

"You ever hear tell of an hombre called 'Dinny' round these parts, Marshal? Bull Martin mentioned him."

"That's probably Dinny O'Connor, who runs the Circle Two on the river. It's several miles west of town."

NEAL BROWN stuck his face in the door. "Wyatt, a gang of Texas men are plannin' to shoot out the lights in the station."

"Excuse me, Vern," said Earp quickly. "One of my busy nights. Wait here for me. Don't try travelin' alone on Bull's trail." He hurried out to join his deputy.

Vern Lewis' lips were firm with determination. He meant to come up with Martin, trace those cows, and get them back.

When the darkness of night had come Vern Lewis jogged westward through the darkness. The Arkansas wound slowly across the plains and by its gleam he made his way. Night herding had taught him how to proceed under the stars.

He knew what he was doing was foolhardy, heading alone for Dinny O'Connor's Circle 2, on that hunch. All he had overheard Bull Martin say was, "Tell Dinny I'll see him in the morning," and on that slim clue he had thrown all else to the winds and was rushing there.

Shorty and the boys had gone off somewhere. Lewis had only suspicion to back him and he could not call out the busy marshals. So he was going it alone, and first he meant to check the Circle 2.

Shortly the west wind, in his face, brought to him a familiar odor—the pungent smell of burning hide and hair. Somebody was doing a little branding. He pressed eagerly on, mounting a slight rise of the prairie, and in the distance could see the red glow of fires. That would be the Circle 2.

Riding closer, he could make out the shapes of the buildings and corrals, hear the angry bellowing of cattle. He kept away from the lighted house, and was finally blocked by a long fence. This enclosure, inside, was thick with steers. Not far away, to the west, branding was going on. Someone shouted and cursed as the cattle lowed. Blinding dust was rising thick from stamping hoofs.

Fastening his horse in a bush clump, Lewis crept in. Like an Indian on a stalk, he drew near the ruby-lit scene.

At least fifty men were working with the cattle. Against this number Vern Lewis had one six-shooter. And he knew that if these were the stolen H K animals the rustlers would riddle him or any other intruder in the night.

First he must make sure that this was the boss' herd. But he could not get in close enough to see the brand, in the darkness. Anyway, they seemed to be almost through work so he would have to wait.

Starting out to get his horse again, he found his way would be blocked by several men who stood by a tool-house near the corral. One of them was leaning on a shovel, and Lewis, flattened against the tool-house wall, in the shadows, listened to them. Several other small sheds stood near—a hay roof, corn crib, and the like. From the one nearest Lewis came the low grunting of pigs being roused.

The night was almost gone. A faint touch of gray showed in the eastern sky. Lewis knew that with daylight he would be caught flat-footed. The man with the shovel threw it down with a curse.

"I'll let the hogs out," he growled. "Then I'm goin' to eat and get to bed. I'm plumb weary."

"The brandin's about done now," another drawled. "He'll have those cows out of here by nine o'clock."

Lewis crept back out of sight as the man came nearer and slowly opened the sty door, to let the pigs run loose, so they could root for themselves. Then the H K cowboy heard the voices of the men retreating as they moved toward the bunkhouse.

Lewis rose up and slipped into that tool-shed. He had thought he would have time to get back to Dodge City for help

but since they meant to move the cattle immediately, he would not leave. And he didn't intend to lose the herd now that he believed he had found it.

After a time, as he stood hidden in the shed, he heard a man sing out:

"Here comes Bull and the agent!"

THE sun was up, reddening the world. Lewis could look through a crack in the dried boards of the shack, and he saw the giant rustler chief, a rough bandage on his ear, ride up with a thin, middle-aged man, agent for a big packing-house. The very man Hal Keeney had arranged with before his cows were stolen!

"Look 'em over," Bull Martin growled, as the pair dismounted. "They come up to specification, Jennings."

Dinny O'Connor and a crowd of rustlers came up and greeted Jennings. O'Connor was a squat-bodied, loud-mouthed fellow, with a tobacco cud distorting his leathery cheek. Lewis missed what first was said because of the noise just outside the shed where he was hiding. Several big hogs were grunting and rooting in the dirt. The boards of the shed creaked against their weight as they pushed eagerly in.

Vern Lewis saw Jennings draw out a large wallet, crammed with bills—and the young H K cowboy swore fervently. Martin and his rustler gang had persuaded the buyer that the cattle were theirs—and they were going to be paid. But then they always maintained an honest front, so that future deals for the cattle they stole would be safe.

They were headed for the big branding corral to look over the prime steers. Lewis heard the pigs almost on top of him. One stuck a snout in under the bottom of the boards and squeezed into the shed. Because he could do nothing else, Lewis sat watching the animals root in the freshly disturbed dirt in one corner. The hogs dug into it with their sharp feet, grunting in satisfaction. And Vern, curious, because suddenly he was remembering that rustler with the spade, stepped over to see what they were after.

One look told him plenty! He marched out through the shed door, making sure his gun was ready. He ran after Jennings, the buyer, and the bunch of tough hombres who were looking in at the cattle.

Jennings was about to pass a big wad of money to Bull Martin, whose eyes were riveted on the cash, just as Vern Lewis caught the agent's arm.

"Don't pay that, mister!" he shouted. "These are stolen cows!"

Martin swung, mouth dropping open in angry surprise at seeing Lewis there, when he had thought the cowboy was safe in Dodge City jail. The rustlers did a large business with Jennings, and they hesitated to kill Vern Lewis for the moment, since they didn't wish to spoil their market. To kill Lewis, they would have to kill Jennings, too, and the buyer was too valuable to them for that.

Jennings swung on Lewis with a frown.

"What do you mean, cowboy?"

"What I said," Vern Lewis said grimly, one eye on Martin's gun hand. "These are H K cows, and they were rustled the other night."

"He's a dirty liar!" shouted Martin angrily. "Look at the brands, Jennings! We got a bill of sale, all legal. These cows come in from Utah. Eight Cross Eight, see?"

"I don't want any truck with stolen cattle, though," Jennings said hesitantly.

They had done an artistic job with running-irons and acids, to change the H K brand, but somehow Jennings was not satisfied.

"Jest step over here, Jennings," Lewis growled, "and I'll show you for certain those are our steers."

"I suppose you got a speakin' acquaintance with 'em," sneered Bull Martin.

Lewis hurried to the shed. Jennings trailed him and so did Bull Martin, Dinny O'Connor and the armed rustler gang, scowling ominously at Lewis.

"Come inside," Vern Lewis said, stepping into the tool-house, Jennings went with him.

When they emerged a minute later, Jennings said severely:

"The feller's right, Bull Martin. You're

a rustler and I don't want any more to do with you."

He turned to head for his horse.

"Wait!" shouted Martin. "You're not goin' anywhere. You've seen too much now, Jennings. You're not goin' back to Dodge to lie about us. Give me that money! And I'll sell these cows, too."

ACTION broke then, with the speed of light. Jennings went for his gun but Martin's was already out and up, blazing. Vern Lewis, whirling, fired from the hip at the giant rustler.

Jennings fell flat on his face, writhing in the dust. Bull Martin was jounced all the way around. His gun flew from his big paw as he yelped in anguish and went down on his knees. He crawled away, and the next moment the whole gang were going for their hardware.

Vern Lewis stared death in the face. He hadn't a chance against fifty guns, and he knew it—but he did not quit. His Colt blasted at his enemies for a second, an instant that allowed him to leap back inside the tool-shed, and crouch behind a couple of steel-plows. Bullets roared at him, struck the metal to glance off, showering him with lead fragments.

"Get in there and kill him!" Bull Martin roared. Evidently Lewis' bullet had only wounded him.

They charged the door. Vern Lewis heard the spang of bullets in the walls, in the dirt. A slug nicked his calf, stinging terribly. He shoved fresh shells into his hot cylinders, his jaw set. He meant to take some of these outlaws with him. He rolled bullets at the bunched rustlers as they came toward him.

Two went down, blocking the doorway. The other rustlers broke under his fire and jumped aside.

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CHAPTER V

Battle

PURPLE with anger, the outlaw chief turned and motioned to his men.

"Smoke him out!" yelled Martin. "Bring some hay and pile it against the walls!"

"Lucy," muttered Vern Lewis, thinking of the girl back in Texas, "I did the best I could. I'm sorry."

He was ready for them and there was no weakening in his tall figure. He was going to make them remember him, at least.

A wisp of smoke came in through a crack and then more. The beleaguered cowboy coughed as the acrid vapor caught his throat. He decided instantly that he would not wait until he was blinded and had to run out, but rose up, gun filled again, to try a final dash across the yard.

But oddly, just as he reached the door, the shooting lulled. Crouched by the sill, Lewis wondered why.

Then he heard fast hoofbeats, and saw that the mob of gunmen were rushing toward the eastern edge of the ranch. He peered out—and a voice sharp as a whip-crack, sounded over the din:

"Drop your guns and reach high!"

A line of horsemen whirled in, quickly dismounted. Shoulder to shoulder they marched toward the rustlers who had stopped at the command and were now drawn up in a bunch. Wyatt Earp was in the lead of the half dozen gunfighters who had swooped down so unexpectedly. Bat Masterson was at his right; Neal Brown on the other side. Sheriff Charlie Bassett, Ed Masterson, Billy Tilghman and Jim Masterson filled out the posse.

Fifty rustler gunmen faced the famous peace-officers. Each marshal, besides two six-shooters, carried a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun, wide muzzles aimed at the thieves.

A hulking figure came stealing back through the gang, leaving the fight. It was

Bull Martin. Just then Dinny O'Connor shouted: "Let 'em have it, boys!"

In the ensuing din, smoke of battle and dust, details were hard to make out. Jim Masterson was cursing acidly. The six shotguns bellowed, and scattering shot took the rustlers in front. The marshals jumped for a log pile nearby from which to make their fight, Ed Masterson limping from a thigh wound.

Vern Lewis stepped out to confront the retreating Bull Martin.

"Bull!" he growled.

Martin saw him, blocking the path. Fury blackened the giant's eyes, the killer pall came over his ugly, thicklipped face. He threw up the gun in his paw, and Lewis saw the flare of it, felt the bullet burn along his ribs, as he let go at Martin.

With a harsh scream, the rustler chief jumped around the shed, lost in the rising smoke from the burning hay that was licking up against the wood wall. Gasping from his hurt, Lewis limped after his enemy.

Bull Martin was forking his horse near the corral as Vern Lewis tore at him. Martin had his reins in one hand to control the skittish mount; in his other he gripped his Colt. He swung the plunging horse to send a bullet at the charging Lewis. The slug, spoiled of aim by the horse's motions, passed through Vern Lewis' hat but did not harm him. The cowboy could see the red glow of his arch-foe's eyes as Bull Martin took a more careful bead to finish him

Colt hammer back, Lewis aimed between the fiery eyes and raised his thumb.

Martin's last bullet spat up dust between the cowboy's spread boots. The big rustler's gun arm fell limp. A scarlet blob appeared between Martin's eyes, and the bronc's quick movement threw him out of his saddle, where he sprawled in a limp heap, dead.

The terrific din of the battle deafened Lewis. He made sure Bull Martin was done, then swung back. He almost ran into the rustlers, half of them down. He paused long enough to fight his way into the tool-shed, one wall of which was blazing high. He groped through the smoke to the corner and hurriedly saved his evidence, dumping it outside at a safe distance. "Charge!" roared Dinny O'Connor. "There's only six of 'em!"

GATHERING themselves together, the rustlers made a concerted dash at the woodpile where the few marshals crouched. The maddened thieves were determined to overwhelm the lawmen.

Vern Lewis broke that hot charge. Kneeling at the corner of the barn he poured a hot fire into the backs of the rustlers who had to turn, making an easy target for the guns of the marshals. A dozen more fell. The rest broke and ran helter-skelter, picked off one by one. Some threw down their guns and raised their hands in surrender.

In short order the rustler guns were piled up, prisoners herded under the ready pistols of the Dodge City marshals. Vern Lewis shook hands with Wyatt Earp.

"Sure swell of you to come out and help me," Lewis said gratefully.

"I ought to be thankin' you, Vern," replied Earp. "You saved my life last night in Dodge and I reckon you deserve what little I could do. I thought, from your askin' about O'Connor, you must have headed here, when I got back and didn't find you. So, soon as possible, I collected some friends and we rode over."

"I found the boss' steers!" cried Lewis. "They're in that big corral."

Dinny O'Connor, blood streaming down his scowling face from a scalp wound, shouted indignantly at Earp:

"Marshal, you'll get in tall trouble for this! You can't rush a man's ranch, shoot down his help, and expect to get away with it. There's people in this county'll see you are punished."

"Are you dead certain these cows're H K, Vern?" Earp asked gravely.

Vern Lewis strolled over to fetch back some evidence. "Here, Marshal," he said. "Take a look. These are chunks of ears clipped off of those steers. You can see they're fresh nipped, and every one carries our earmark, lawfully registered. O'Con-

nor buried the remains inside the toolshed to keep animals from diggin' 'em up, but his hogs rooted 'em out for me. Look in the book, Jennings has one with him, and you'll see these clips show our ranch mark, provin' they're our property."

O'Connor cursed in confusion. The proof was overwhelming. Earp shoved him into the gang of prisoners.

"Lewis is right," he snapped. "Got you cold, O'Connor. It's high time you were cleaned out of Ford County."

Jennings had been tended to, and he would survive. He would live to buy the recovered herd.

When rescued and rescuers were mounted, ready to take the prisoners to the town, Wyatt Earp said to Vern Lewis:

"By the way, I ran into the doctor before I left this mornin'. He says Keeney will recover. You did a bang-up job, cleanin' out this nest of theives for Dodge. The city will want to reward and thank you. Let's amble."

Happiness beat high in Vern Lewis' heart. He was proud to ride into Dodge City with the famous officers, and prouder still when Wyatt Earp said to him:

"Any time you get tired of nursin' cows, there's a deputy marshal's job open for a man who can shoot as straight, and stick on a trail the way you have."

Vern Lewis thanked him. But he knew he would soon be heading south, back to Lucy on the H K, with her father safe and sound and the money for the herd in their wallets. He had met the guns of Dodge City, both good and evil, and triumphed.

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GORILLA MEAT

"That," Gorilla Jones sez, "was a flyin' drop-kick"

By L. P. HOLMES

When the terror of Dead Hoss Junction challenges Cactus City, Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly need someone to defend its fair name!

THINGS IS quiet around Cactus City. Things is too durned quiet. And I, Ike Ferris, has got a uneasy feelin' that she's the quiet before the storm, as the poet feller would say.

Ain't been a cussed thing happen for weeks an' weeks that's any out of the ordinary. The sun rises an' the sun sets. Folks git up, eat, do a day's work, eat, go to bed agin, whilst takin' on a snort or two of corn likker in between times, if they're lucky enough to have the price. Which I an' Puggy Jimpson an' Shoo-fly Davis ain't allus that lucky.

Much as I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly enjoys peace an' quiet, there comes a time when too much of it can be more'n twice as much as plenty. So I an' Puggy plumb understands jest how Shoo-fly feels when, one warm an' sleepy afternoon he up an' proclaims:

"If'n somethin' excitin' don't happen purty quick I'm gonna throw me a hyderphoby fit an' cut loose with some yellin' they'll hear three states away. I'll start me a gol-durn war, or I'll set fire to Jake Pickle's wood shed, or I'll—"

"You'll shut up an' come on over to the

Oasis," cuts in the growl of Bosco Bates, our big tough sheriff. "That means all three of yuh."

Bosco has come into the door of the little cabin I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly holds down out at the edge of town. All three of us come to the same idee quick an' instanter an' we bounces up off'n our bunks plumb eager.

"Somebody over there settin' up the drinks, Bosco?" asks Shoo-fly, anxious-like. "Some fine, big-hearted sport yearnin' for some drinkin' partners? We'll shore be happy to oblige."

"If'n you think you can wangle a free drink outa Measly Trotter, you got my permission to try," sez Bosco. "Personally I don't think you'd have much luck. No, there ain't no free drinks waitin' in the Oasis—there is jest Measly Trotter."

"Then what's the idee herdin' us over there?" argues Shoo-fly. "We kin get along fine without gazin' on Measly Trotter's skin-flint carcass."

"Dead Hoss Junction," sez Bosco, "has gone proud on us agin. They is feelin' their oats. They is steppin' high, wide an' handsome. They is set to spit in our eye an' make us like it."

Shoo-fly bristles. "They is, is they? How many times we got to lick the daylights outa that bunch of no account bee-heads 'fore they realizes who their betters is? What's bitin' 'em now?"

"Drag along an' find out," sez Bosco, headin' for the Oasis.

MEBBE I better explain a little to you gents about this Dead Hoss Junction crowd. Dead Hoss Junction is a flea-bit town off in one corner of Cactus County, and is plumb jealous of Cactus City. We has put on a rodeo, we has had a carnival. Wantin' to get even, Dead Hoss Junction gets itself a prizefighter an' challenges us to find somebody who can lick him. Which we does. One of our boys, Finn Francis, knocks the stuffin' outa Dead Hoss Junction's prizefighter.

So then Dead Hoss Junction puts on a Fourth of July cellybration an' fixes up a tug-of-war contest between them an' us. We out tugs 'em. Still they ain't satisfied we is the better men. From what Bosco Bates has jest said they has now got some new idee. For Measly Trotter is the big frog in the Dead Hoss Junction puddle and does their talkin' for 'em.

Me, Ike Ferris, peggin' along to the Oasis, I gits me a funny feelin'. Plumb invariable, whenever we has a contest with them Dead Hoss Junction sports, she ends up in a general ruckus along side which the battle of Bunker Hill is a plumb mild picnic. I've come outa them there shakedowns so beat up I been cross-eyed fer a week. So you can't rightly blame me if'n I'm a mite suspicious of this here visit from Measly Trotter.

Measly shore ain't buyin' no drinks, not even for himself. He's just leanin' agin Tug Stevens' Oasis bar, lookin' kinda haughty an' proud, if'n you can say a wattle-necked turkey buzzard kin look that way.

Shoo-fly Davis, him bein' a gingery lil' squirt, he braces right up to ol' Measly an' looks him spang in the eye.

"Hear tell you're feelin' proud, Measly," sez Shoo-fly. "How come? You yearnin' I should take you outside an' bat yuh bowlegged? If so, jest say the word. Fer I'm just the busy lil' bee who'd admire to take on sech a pleasant chore."

Measly, he looks Shoo-fly over plumb scornful. "I is here to flick the glove of challenge in the faces of you Cactus City hombres," orates Measly. "I is here to toss the gage of honorable conflict in yore laps. I speak for Gorilla Jones an' for all the citizens of Dead Hoss Junction, in whose veins true sportin' fire burns bright an' clear."

Which flow of ten dollar words sets Shoo-fly kinda back on his heels an' makes him bat his eyes, bewildered-like. But Puggy Jimpson, like he allus does, comes down to the nut in the cake.

"Who," asks Puggy, "is Gorilly Jones? Never heard of that bee-head before."

"Gorilla Jones," sez Measly, "is a wrastler. He has wrastled the best of them. He has wrastled before the crowned heads

of Yurrup. He has wrastled in all the great cities of the world. He has wrastled champeens an' near champeens. An' now he yearns to wrastle the best man you Cactus City tinhorns kin produce. And right here"—Measly taps his pocket—"is one hundred pesos of good Dead Hoss Junction money that sez Gorilla Jones will wrastle yore man down to a thin whisper. In the immortal words of Julie Caesar, here's where you Cactus City bee-heads has got to put up or shut up."

"We'll put up!" squalls Shoo-fly Davis. "Durn right we will. Cat-face Collins is a wrastlin' fool. He'll wrastle this here Gorilly Jones plumb outa his britches. Ain't that so, Bosco?"

"No, it ain't," sez Bosco, plumb sorrowful. "Yestiday Cat-face got throwed by a bad bronc an' busted an arm. We gotta locate us another man. Measly, you head on home an' mind your business for a few days. Gorilly or no Gorilly, you ain't bluffin' us none. When we git our man rounded up, I'll let yuh know. An' you kin scramble some more money outa yore Dead Hoss Junction sports, because we aim to back our man two hundred pesos' worth. That's whatever!"

"That's tellin' 'em, Bosco!" whoops Shoo-fly. "Durn right. This here Gorilly Jones has bought hisself a wrastle if'n I have to take a whirl at him myself."

Measly Trotter heads for the door, grinnin' like a fox eatin' fish worms.

"Gents," he sez, "you've asked for it. An' this time you're gonna get it. Gorilly Jones feeds on raw meat. He breaks strong men's bones. He's a wolf, he's a tiger. Don't forget to let me know about this, Bosco."

They is a council of war called in the Oasis. Everybody who counts a-tall in our neck of the woods is there, includin' I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly. The idea is, who we gonna find who can wrastle this here Gorilly Jones hairpin? Was it hoss racin', foot racin', bronc twistin', fancy shootin', bull doggin', calf ropin', hoss shoes or even mumbley-peg, we coulda come up with a champeen who'd done real credit to Cactus City. But a dadburned wrastler, what with Cat-face Collins laid up with a busted arm, well, we jest didn't know which way to turn.

We is a plumb gloomy bunch of loyal citizens, what I mean, for it's beginnin' to look like them Dead Hoss Junction sports has at last got us where the hair is short. An' that's when Frenchy, the barber, who's been sittin' by kinda quiet an' sayin' nothin', opens up with a few words that brings out the great idee.

"Fer one thing," sez Frenchy, "a wrastler who's gonna be a good wrastler, has gotta look like a wrastler."

" 'Zat so?" snaps Shoo-fly. "What's a wrastler look like? Speakin' personal, I wouldn't care if'n we uncovered one who looked like a chicken-stealin' coyote with five tails, jest so he could up an' put the toss on this here Gorilly Jones hombre."

FRENCHY pulls a tattered ol' copy of the Police Gazette from his pocket an' pokes a finger.

"That's what a wrastler has gotta look like. Gotta have some beef on him."

Squintin' at the picture, Shoo-fly grunts, "That ain't beef—that's lard—all belly. Who's that jigger supposed to be?"

"Ain't supposed. Is," sez Frenchy. "That's the Hungarian strong man, champeen of all Yurrup an' half of Chiny. That there is a wrastler what is."

"Mebbo so," opines Shoo-fly. "To me he looks kinda like what Willie Weehaw would, was Willie to have nothin' on but half his underwear."

"That's it!" whoops Shanty Mike Mulligan. "Shoo-fly, you is a genius! You've named our man. Willie Weehaw!"

For a minute there, nobody ketches fire but Shanty Mike. The idee of fat Willie Weehaw, our town grocery man, bein' a honest-to-gosh wrastler, kinda floors us.

Puggy Jimpson sez, kinda hopeless like, "Willie ain't never wrastled nothin' stronger than a barrel of flour in all his borned days. Lotta lard on Willie an' lard ain't muscle."

"Oh, I don't know!" chirps Shoo-fly, a gleam comin' into his eyes. "Willie's a

heap stouter than you think. I oughta know. I've tangled horns with Willie plenty times an' he's far from bein' exactly puny. Was Willie to really git his temper up an' put his back into it, I bet he could do a fair chore of pushin' a mountain down."

From there, the idee ketches on fast. Everybody begins to git excited—everybody but Puggy.

"Ain't no use to git all worked up, gents," sez Puggy. "Willie won't agree to do no wrastlin'. He jest ain't no wrastlin' kind. Go ask him, an' see if I ain't right."

Bosco Bates clears his throat plenty tough-like. "I an' Shanty Mike is gonna ask him—an' Willie will wrastle, or my name ain't Bosco Bates. Shoo-fly, go tell Willie I want to see him, here an' now."

Shoo-fly don't waste no time. He lights out like his shirt-tail was on fire an' it ain't five minutes later when he comes back, with Willie Weehaw follerin', lookin' kinda anxious an' scared.

"You wanta see me, Bosco?" gulps Willie. "What for? I ain't done nothin'."

"Ain't what yuh have done, Willie—it's what you're gonna do," sez Bosco, grim-like. "Here's the picture." An' Bosco proceeds to tell Willie all about it. "So," ends Bosco, "we've done give you the great honor of upholding the fame an' glory of Cactus City. We has picked you as our man to wrastle this here Gorilly Jones an' show them Dead Hoss Junction tinhorns they can't pick no kind of a man at anything that we can't pick a better one. Stick yore chest out, Willie. You is our champeen wrastler."

"No. Nun—nun—nuthin' doin'," stutters Willie, beginnin' to sweat. "I don't yearn to wrastle a busted-down tabby cat, let alone any of these here gorilly monsters. I don't yearn to be no champeen at anythin' but sackin' spuds fer women folks or sellin' candy to kids. Thanky jest the same, Bosco. Now I gotta git back to my store."

Willie woulda flitted, then an' there, but Bosco heads him off, shakin' a finger under Willie's nose an' backin' him plumb across the Oasis. Bosco puts on his best growl an' fiercest look.

"What kinda loyal Cactus City citizen are you, anyhow?" rumbles Bosco. "You is the gent who's allus hollerin' about civic pride, about doin' things that'll put Cactus City on the map an' bring her fame an' fortune. An' now, the fust time you is asked to do one of them very things you holler so much about, you're all set to back down an' skin out an' leave the fair name of Cactus City wallerin' in the dust of shame. You is willin' to let them Dead Hoss Junction sports jeer at us an' sneer at us an' laugh at us. Why, dag blast yore hide, Willie Weehaw, if'n you let us down now, I'll put you in jail for the rest of yore natural life. I'll make you an outcast. Men won't speak to yuh. Women an' kids will turn their faces away when you pass by."

"Likewise an' besides," puts in Shanty Mike Mulligan, "I'll take all my hotel dinin' room business away from you, Willie."

"Me," sez High Pockets Magee, "I'll sic my Tip dawg on yuh every chance I get."

"You'll never git another hair cut in my barber shop," adds Frenchy.

Tug Stevens speaks up from behind the bar. "You'll never enter the doors of this here palace of pleasure again, Willie, if you let us down now."

Pore Willie. He ain't got a chance. He rolls his eyes kinda wild. He sweats an' gags an' gulps. But he sees they ain't no way out, so finally he lets out a big sigh an' nods his head.

"A'right," he wheezes. "If I gotta, I gotta. I'll wrastle this here Gorilly Jones. I'll wrastle him until he breaks down in tears. I'll wrastle him until somethin' busts. When does this wrastlin' thingamajing start?"

"In about ten days or two weeks," says Bosco Bates. "They is things to be done an' you has to do a mite of trainin'. Ike Ferris, you an' Puggy Jimpson is hereby ordered to give Willie some exercise at wrastlin'. An' yuh might as well git in the first licks right now. Ike, give Willie

a whirl an' see can you upset him."

Puggy groans. "Here we go agin', Ike. Comes a mean chore to do, we is allus it. Throw Willie down, Ike—an' keep him down, else I'll have to tangle with him. I can see it comin' up."

WELL, GENTS, right then an' there, Willie Weehaw gits in his first lick at wrastlin' trainin'. Poker tables is pushed back an' I an' Willie is give free use of all the middle of the Oasis.

I grab hold of Willie, set my feet an' give a heave. Nothin' happens. I puts my back into the next yank. Still nothin' happens. About then I realizes I is tied into right close on to three hundred pounds of bone an' meat an' lard—mostly lard. Jest the same, nothin' gives.

Willie grabs me. Mebbe Willie figgers me jest another barrel of flour needin' to be tossed around. Anyhow, when Willie gives things the old heave-ho I turns a kinda flip-flop an' come down spang on the floor, hard enough to jar my eye-teeth. Not only that—Willie falls on me.

I don't think Willie did it on purpose. I think mebbe when he give me the flip he jest lost his balance. But whether Willie means it or not, the effects is the same.

Gents, if you ever had half the Rocky Mountains fall on yuh, then you know just the way I felt. I figger I'm drove plumb through the floor. My bones is water. I'm a plumb squashed Injun. For a minute things go dim on me.

I hear some yellin'. I hear boots dancin' all around. I hears Bosco Bates whoop.

"Thataboy, Willie! I knew it. I knew you was a champeen wrastler. You handle that there Gorilly Jones thataway an' we got them Dead Hoss Junction sports licked to a frazzle."

Willie heaves himself off'n me an' I begins to come back to life. Everybody is poundin' Willie on the back an' whoopin' it up. Everybody but Puggy Jimpson. Good ol' Puggy is lookin' down at me sad an' sorrowful like.

"Yessir," sez Puggy, "I kin shore see it comin' up. At fust I figger it was Willie Weeshaw who was gonna be the martyr. I was wrong. I an' you is the martyrs, Ike. You think you'll live?"

Well, friends, I lived all right. But there were times when I figgered I might be better off dyin' an' gettin' it over with. Likewise the same for Puggy. Because three or four times a day I an' Puggy has to go git throwed down by Willie Weehaw. No, he don't fall on us no more—he just flings us around like we was sacks of spuds, or somethin'. I gets knots an' bruises all over me, likewise with Puggy. Each night we climb groanin' into our beds of misery, hopin' that mornin' would never come again. But it allus does an' we have to go get flung by Willie some more.

Wouldn't have been so bad if Willie'd been a leetle more gentle. But not Willie —no sir! Willie's beginnin' to feel his oats. He acts like he's feedin' on raw meat. He keeps flingin' I an' Puggy harder all the time.

One night when Puggy is inchin' an' groanin' his way into his blankets he ups an' speaks his mind.

"Ike," he sez, "you know what I hope? I'll tell yuh. I hope this Gorilly Jones hombre ties Willie Weehaw into a diamond hitch an' leaves him thataway forever. That's what I hope, Ike."

"Puggy," sez I, "you speak my thoughts eggzactly. I'm so sick of Willie Weehaw I could break down an' weep. I hopes Gorilly Jones scalps him complete before he ties him in that knot. Kee-ristopher! Am I a whipped-down Injun!"

Shoo-fly Davis, who's come into the cabin about that time, he snorts plumb disdainful at us.

"You jiggers oughta be ashamed of yourselves," orates Shoo-fly. "Ain't you willin' to do your duty by your town an' your friends? Ain't you willin' to help lick them Dead Hoss Junction hairpins? Where at's your civic pride?"

Puggy rises up, starts gittin' outa his blankets. "Shoo-fly," he sez, plenty grim-like, "you has been my pal an' friend for a long time. But unless you leaves off that kinda chatter I'm gonna plumb ruin you forever, right here an' now. No,

I ain't got no civic pride. I ain't got one lil' smidgin of civic pride no more. All I got is a overdose of bumps an' bruises an' creaky joints. I'm beat to hamburger meat. I'm sayin' for you an' everybody else to hear that I hope Gorilly Jones flings Willie Weehaw down so hard it plumb jars his ancestors. Now shut up an' get outa here while you're still in one piece. You hear me!"

Shoo-fly hears all right, an' he shuts up an' gets out. Puggy lowers down easy into his blankets agin.

"Civic pride!" he mutters. "I never wanta hear them words agin."

I RECKON a man can get used to anything, give him time enough. Or mebbe it's just that I an' Puggy gets beat up so bad by bein' flang here an' yonder by Willie Weehaw we gets numb in head an' body an' is so chock full of misery we just can't absorb no more. Anyhow, we last it out. We is still in there, bein' flang, when Bosco Bates an' Shanty Mike Mulligan opines that Willie is trained enough an' that he kin lay off until the wrastlin' match proper comes along.

They has built a wrastlin' ring out in the street in front of the Oasis. Bosco Bates sez flat out to Measly Trotter that long as the box fightin' champeenship had been decided in Dead Hoss Junction, back when Finn Francis larrups their best man, it's only fair that the wrastlin' champeenship should be decided in Cactus City. To which Dead Hoss Junction can't rightly object, so that's the way she is arranged.

Jake Pickle, him bein' plumb handy with tools, has been give the job of buildin' that ring an' he's still putterin' around it, doin' some last fixin' when I an' Puggy drags our achin', beat-up selves over to have a look at things.

"Think she's strong enough, Jake?" asks Puggy.

Jake grins, his Adam's apple playin' hop-scotch up an' down.

"I reckon, Puggy. The joists is all six-by-sixes an' the floor is two-by-twelves; an' she's braced all around purty stout."

Puggy looks wistful. "I wish," sez he, "there was a weak spot somewhere, so's when Gorilly Jones upsets Willie, ol' Willie goes plumb through to Chiny. Yessir, I shore would admire to see Willie go clean outa sight an' never come up."

Jake scratches his head. "I dunno nothin' about that, but I'm kinda worried some about this here gorilly hombre. Is he a man or is he a animal? Last night I got out Missis Pickle's ol' ditchinary an' looked up one of these here gorillys. There was a pitchure an' man!—that there gorilly is shore a mean-lookin' critter to be runnin' loose. Mebbe I shoulda built a cage around this here ring. I aim to watch this here ruckus from a safe distance. Likewise an' besides, I'm gonna have my ol' .44 six-gun tucked in my jeans. That gorilly gits through feedin' on Willie, mebbe he'll git other idees an' me, I aims to play it safe."

"That gorilly makes a real feed off'n Willie, I aims to buy him a couple of the biggest snorts of corn juice you ever saw," swears Puggy.

"What's this—what's this?" comes Bosco Bates' growl from behind us. "Is there a traitor in camp? Did I jest hear you make some treasonous talk agin' our champeen, Willie Weehaw?"

Ol' Puggy turns around an' looks Bosco spang in the eye.

"Bosco," sez Puggy, "I dunno what you're tryin' to call it an' I don't care. I'm speakin' my mortal true feelin's. For I've done reached the point of sufferin' past which I don't give three whoops an' a holler what happens. You heard me right. I hope Gorilly Jones makes corn' beef hash outa Willie Weehaw. I hope Gorilly Jones spreads lard over half of Cactus County. Now if'n you want to throw me in your flea pasture of a jail, you go ahead. I'd sooner be et to death by fleas than I would flang to death by Willie Weehaw. Ain't no death mortal man could suffer worse than bein' flang here an' yonder by Willie."

For once, Bosco knows better'n to push a argyment. There's a light in ol' Puggy's eyes which sez beware. An'

Bosco, he bewares. He begins walkin' around the ring, givin' a pull here an' a stamp there. Nothin' gives an' Bosco nods, plumb satisfied.

"Somethin' busts," he sez, "it won't be the ring. Jake, you've done yourself proud."

Well, sirs, by the time the great day arrives, I an' Puggy has had a chance to more or less nurse ourselves free of the worst of our bumps an' bangs an' we is over at the Oasis when the Dead Hoss Junction sports begin to arrive in town. They start comin' in early an' they shore is full of swagger an' bully-puss.

A couple of them characters is White-eye Whitney an' Spivvy Jenks, which these two allus did rub I an' Puggy the wrong way. A couple of times us an' they has had what the poet feller might call right vociferous argyments an' so far I an' Puggy ain't come off second best. So, when them two start rawhidin' us, we don't back up none or bow our heads in shame.

"We been hearin' things," taunts White-eye Whitney. "We been hearin' how you Cactus City bee heads has been tryin' to make a wrastlin' tiger-man outa a over-stuffed grocery clerk. An' that you two jiggers in particular has been trainin' partners of this here spud tosser. You figger it's gonna do yuh any good?"

Ol' Puggy, he sorta spreads his fingers an' stretches his arms.

"I an' Ike ain't makin' no claims of bein' anythin' but a couple of ordinary cow-pokes. We ain't tryin' to pass as bein' wrastlers of one kind or another. But this much we know, White-eye Whitney: Never was a time an' never will be a time when I an' Ike can't take on you an' Mister Spivvy Jenks at any old kind of roundelay you want to name an' proceed to kick the everlastin' liver an' lights outa the pair of you. So watch your jaw, Mister Whitney—watch your jaw!"

Ol' White-eye, he musta figgered Puggy had somethin' there, for he shuts up an' edges away from us. But Spivvy Jenks, he has to have his say, which he does.

"Wait'll you see our man," he squawks. "Jest wait'll you cast a eye on Gorilly Jones. You'll see a real wrastlin' man. Jest wait."

"We is waitin'," sez Puggy. "Where is this Gorilly Jones? Bring him on. I crave to look him over."

But they don't bring Gorilly Jones on until just a few minutes before the big show is to start. It ain't until then that a old thorough-brace Concord stage come creakin' an' jouncin' in from Dead Hoss Junction, with all curtains pulled. It pulls up alongside the ring an' Measly Trotter steps out, plumb pompous an' important.

"Make way!" bawls Measly. "Make way for Gorilla Jones, the champeen wrastler of Cactus County an' all the territory between here an' Mexico!"

WE ALL cranes our necks as this here Gorilly Jones steps out. Right away, much as I got a grudge agin Willie Weehaw, I begins feelin' kinda sorry for Willie. For this Gorilly Jones hombre is big. I mean big! He looms up like a moose alongside of a jackrabbit when you compare him with Measly Trotter. He's got on a bathrobe big enough for a circus tent. He's got a bullet head with a short roached haircut. He's homely as sin, with his face kinda all pulled an' pushed together. His ears is thick an' flarin', like chunks of over-done flapjacks stuck on his head. An' where that bathrobe hangs open at his chest I can see hair as thick an' tangled as you'd see on a bear.

Gorilly, he climbs into the ring an' sets down on a lil' stool in one corner. Measly Trotter struts up an' down in front of him.

"Here's our man," yelps Measly. "Where's your'n? Or is he done scared to show up?"

Me, I wouldn't have much blamed Willie Weehaw if'n about that time he was hid out in High Pockets Magee's livery barn hay loft. But no sir—not Willie. Here he comes down the street, likewise wearin' a bathrobe, with Bosco Bates an' Shanty Mike Mulligan an'

Shoo-fly Davis trottin' along with him.

True enough, when Willie gets his first look at Gorilly Jones, his eyes kinda pop an' he goes a lil' pale around the gills. But he climbs into the ring, gruntin' a mite, an' takes his seat in a corner opposite to Gorilly.

Shanty Mike gets into the ring an' holds up both hands to get the crowd quiet. Then he introduces Gorilly Jones an' fat Willie. Everybody yells. When things quiet down again, Shanty Mike yells:

"This wrastlin' match is for the champeenship of Cactus County. The winner will be decided by the best two falls outa three. Nobody is allowed in the ring but Willie an' Gorilly an' the referee, which is me. Let 'er go!"

It's Measly Trotter helpin' Gorilly Jones outa his bath robe, whilst Shoo-fly Davis an' Bosco Bates does the same for Willie. Gorilly Jones is durn near nekkid. All he's got on is a pair of lil' sawed-off pants. Willie, him bein' more modest, you might say, has got on a long-handled suit of red underwear, in which he shore bulges out aplenty.

Willie an' Gorilly comes to the center of the ring an' shakes hands. Next thing I know, Gorilly yanks Willie in close, tangles one of Willie's arms up in a funny way an' then—*kerwhang!* Willie turns plumb over in the air an' comes down like a ellyphunt fallin' off a mountain. Mebbe the floor of that ring was made outa two-by-twelve planks, but I swear I see 'em sag a full foot when Willie lands.

Looks to me like everything has ended then an' there an' I guess the Dead Hoss Junction crowd thinks the same, for they let out a long wolf howl of jubilation. But Gorilly Jones moves away from Willie an' grins all around.

"That," he sez, in a funny, husky voice, "that was a wristlock. I coulda dropped him harder, but I don't want to—yet!"

As for Willie, he lays there all spread out like a squashed tomato, his eyes bugged out like marbles. But purty soon he decides he ain't daid after all an' he starts to git up. Quick-like, ol' Gorilly lands on him, grabs one of Willie's feet, yanks it up an' around.

Willie lets loose a howl fit to raise your hair.

"Pry him off—pry him off!" bawls Willie. "He's bustin' my laig. Pry him off!"

Gorilly Jones just sits there, grinnin'. "This," he sez, "is a toe-hold. I could break his laig, but I ain't gonna—yet!"

Then Gorilly, he lets go of Willie's toe an' grabs him by an arm an' the next thing I know Willie's nose is drove into the floor of the ring, whilst his arm is bent around an' back until he looks double-jointed. Willie lets out another whoop.

"Tear him loose! Git him away from me! Now he's breakin' my arm. Ow-ee-e-e! Tear him loose!"

Gorilly jest lets that grin of his go round an' round.

"This," he sez, "is a hammer-lock. With it I could break his arm an' shoulder—but I ain't ready to—yet!"

All this time them Dead Hoss Junction sports in whoopin' an' hollerin' an' laughin' fit to kill. Their man is shore top dawg an' they is enjoyin' every minute of it. But not us Cactus City fellers. We is so stunned by what we're watchin' we can't get out a yip or a word. All exceptin' Shoo-fly Davis.

Shoo-fly, he's dancin' up an' down at the edge of the ring, yellin' at Shanty Mike Mulligan.

"Don't let him foul Willie thataway, Shanty Mike! Make that Gorilly beehead wrastle fair!"

Shanty Mike shakes his head plumb sorrowful. "Gorilly ain't foulin'. This is a fair wrastle. Willie'll jest have to take his medicine, I reckon."

POOR WILLIE! He shore took it, all right. He gits pulled an' yanked an' twisted into some of the doggondest shapes I ever saw mortal man git into. Some of the time I can't figger whether Willie is pointin' thisaway or thataway. You can't tell where his arms an' legs begin or leave off. Yessir, Willie Wee-

haw is shore one tangled-up basket of snakes.

An' all the time Gorilly Jones is grinnin' an' talkin', tellin' what kinda hold this is an' what kinda hold that is an' how he could bust Willie into forty-'leven pieces, was he of a mind to. But he ain't ready to—yet! The way he keeps addin' that 'yet' shore sounds plenty ominous. You get the idea that when he gets tired of foolin' around, ol' Gorilly is really gonna tear Willie apart.

Purty soon Gorilly snaps both laigs around Willie's middle an' sets down with a awful squeeze.

"This," grins Gorilly, "is the body scissors. If I wanted to I could squeeze him flat, but I ain't ready to do that—yet!"

Willie looks like he's ready to pop. His eyes is stuck out like walnuts an' his mouth is open, gaspin' for air.

"Ain't anybody gonna help me?" he moans. "This ain't wrastlin'—this is slow murder. Ain't nobody gonna help me?"

Alongside of me I hear Puggy Jimpson begin to growl.

"In a minute," he threatens, "I'm gonna crawl into that ring with a pick handle an' wear it down to a sliver on that Gorilly Jones' skull. He ain't treatin' our Willie right."

"Thought you wanted to see Willie git what for?" sez I.

"Mebbe I did, then," admits Puggy. "But not now. After all, he is our Willie, an' I am for him agin these durn smart alec Dead Hoss Junction sports, all an' sundry. Ike, ain't there somethin' we kin do for Willie? He's bein' squoze to death before our eyes."

About that time, Gorilly Jones lets up on the leg-squeezin' business an' begins walkin' around the ring, wavin' an' grinnin' at his Dead Hoss Junction friends.

"How far an' where do you want me to throw him, boys?" he yells. "Anywhere within' fifty feet I'll drop him on a dime. You name the spot."

Mebbe about this time Willie figgers it's his one chance to get out of that ring alive. Anyhow, he bounces up an' makes a run for the ropes. He ain't fast enough. Gorilly Jones comes leapin' in, jumps plumb off the floor an' kicks both feet out together. They whams into Willie an' knocks him flat as a pancake in one corner of the ring.

Gorilly Jones struts around, grinnin'. "That," he sez, "was a flyin' drop-kick. That slows 'em up when they try to get away from you. Next time—."

Gents, you can believe me or not, but they wan't any next time, not for Mister Gorilly Jones. Me, I dunno jest what thatthere flyin' drop kick did to fat Willie besides upsettin' him. But it shore did somethin'. For Willie comes up off the floor screechin' like a locoed bobcat. He spins around an' heads for Gorilly Jones with his head down. Gorilly seems so surprised he can't move. Chargin' like a Hereford bull, Willie butts ol' Gorilly plumb in the middle, butts him so hard he lifts Gorilly plumb off'n his feet an' bangs him into the ropes till I thought they'd bust like thread.

WILLIE jumps back. "How d'you like that?" he bawls. "That was a bull butt! Here's another, just like it!"

Whamo! Willie butts Gorilly the same way in the same place an' with the same zingo.

Now it's Gorilly's eyes which is bugged out. He ain't grinnin' none a-tall. His mouth is open an' he cain't seem to git enough air.

Once more Willie jumps back, lets out a yell an' charges in again. Once more he butts Gorilly an' this time, when Gorilly bounces off the ropes his knees turn rubbery an' he begins to sag down.

But Willie don't let him. Willie grabs him an' starts to fling him. He flings Gorilly Jones plumb across the ring. When he lands, Willie falls on him. Then Willie gits up an' gives Gorilly another fling. And again Willie falls on him.

"Pull my arms an' laigs loose will you!" howls Willie. "Squeeze my innards to puddin' will you! Kick me when I ain't lookin', will you! Dern your hide, Gorilly Jones, I'll learn you!"

Willie did. He slammed Gorilly Jones up an' down like he was a empty sack. He like to wore out the floor of that ring with Gorilly Jones. An' then finally Willie sets hisself an' starts swingin' Gorilly around an' around.

"Anywhere up to fifty feet an' on a dime was that he said," squawls Willie. "I kin beat that. Anywhere up to seventy-five feet an' on the head of a pin. Here he comes, you Dead Hoss Junction tin-horns. Here's your mighty wrastlin' man. Ketch!"

Willie lets Gorilly Jones go. Man alive! Who ever saw such a throw? Ol' Gorilly he sails an' sails, limp as a wrung-out dish rag. An' durn me if Willie didn't make a dead center shot. He lands Gorilly Jones smack in the open door of the stage Gorilly had come in.

How that stage hung together I'll never know. But it did. An' there Gorilly Jones hung, half in, half out, one plumb ruined wrastlin' man. There ain't no question of who won that wrastlin' match. Willie Weehaw stamps around that ring, master of all he surveyed, as the poet feller would say.

Gradually us Cactus City boys come alive. We begins to yell—an' how we yells! We climbs up into that ring an' we hoists good ol' Willie up on our shoulders an' parades around an' around. She's quite a hoist, gittin' Willie up there an' considerable chore packin' him around, but we don't care. Willie's our boy an' he's a champeen.

Somehow we ends up in the Oasis an' the amber sunshine that comes in jugs flows an' flows. I remember Shanty Mike Mulligan standin' on the bar makin' a speech. I remember him fallin' off. I remember I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly an' good ol' Willie with our arms around each other, singing, "She'll be comin' 'round the mountain."

By an' by I remembers to go out to the street for a look. There ain't a Dead Hoss Junction hairpin in sight. The stage is gone, everythin' is gone. Like the poet says, them Dead Hoss Junction sports has plumb folded their wickiups an' silently stole away. An' they took their great wrastlin' man, Mister Gorilly Jones, with 'em.

I ducks back inside, takes on another snort of liquid sunshine an' gits in on another chorus.

"She'll be drivin' three white hosses when she co-omes—!"

The Way of the Indian

OLD-TIMERS like to tell this story, which is illustrative of the natural wisdom and self-control of the Indian. An Indian and two white friends were riding across the Idaho lava beds from the Lost River country to the railroad station at Arco. They had been in the saddle since before sun-up.

One of the white men asked their Indian friend, well in the afternoon, if he were hungry. "No," he replied. It was close to four when they reached town. They made a bee-line for the nearest eatery and ordered extra large steaks, double portions of potatoes and plenty of coffee and pie. All three piled into the food. The Indian finished his first and looked around for more.

"Thought you said you weren't hungry," remarked one of his companions.

The Indian looked scornfully at his white pal. "Out there," he said "no good to be hungry. No food. Here, lots of food. Be hungry like hell!" —*Simpson M. Ritter*

A NOVELET

Out of the saloon came two local citizens, guns in hand

SATAN SIDES A GUNMAN

By JOHN A. SAXON

CHAPTER I

Rescue Under Difficulties

JERRY SEDDON jerked the black horse to a stop in the red clay above the river bank. Rain in flat sheets, whipped by a wind that sent the particles of water stinging into his face like biting pieces of rock, swirled about him.

The black was winded, spent, and behind Seddon the man-pack was in full cry, hungry for the cowman's pelt, anxious to yank him skyward from the nearest wind-swept cottonwood.

Numbed hands hitched the gun beneath the yellow slicker a little more toward the front. Curse them! He'd give them a fight!

Trapped, that's what he was. In front, the surging, boiling, mud-stained waters

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Wanted for murder and bank robbery, Jerry Seddon might still avenge his father and win justice for those poor sodbusters, but how could he escape the hangrope at the end of his trail?

of the Republican in full flood. Behind him, an angry posse.

Twenty-four years old—and at the end of his string. He should have known Buck Trenton was up to something when he suggested riding into the cowtown of Wainright that afternoon. They'd all known what was coming—all except him. Trenton was a fool, figuring that he could stick up a bank and get away with it. In any case he had known better than to tell Seddon his intentions. Jerry Seddon might be a wild young rannihan, but he was no bank robber, no killer.

Killer! He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, staring at the flood. Three of those cowboys would never ride again. He could still see their limp bodies, slumped in the middle of the street in front of the Golden Nugget Saloon across from the Drovers' Bank—boys whose only crime up to then had been to follow too

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blindly the lead of Buck Trenton.

There had been six of them who rode into town, including Trenton and Seddon. Two men in the bank had been killed before the would-be bank robbers even got a chance to grab up any money. In sudden panic, the six had dashed out of the bank, and across the street, to find all of their horses save Seddon's black, had scattered, for they had not been tied. The black's reins were fastened to the rail.

OUT of the saloon had come two local citizens, six-guns in either hand. One of them was long haired and wore the buckskin shirt of a plainsman. Their guns started roaring and three of the waddies went down beneath the hail of lead. Another man was wounded—and then Trenton shot and killed the two local citizens.

A sudden cloudburst sent rain pouring down on the town. In the confusion Seddon managed to get the black's reins untied and swing into the saddle and get away, putting on his yellow slicker as he rode. There was no time to see what had happened to Trenton and the wounded man, but he was sure they had escaped.

And now—no horse could breast that flood before him. Stumps, driftwood, uprooted trees were boiling in the angry torrent.

Luckily they hadn't seen him clearly back in town. Still, that yellow slicker might mark him.

He halfway unfastened it, as though contemplating pitting his strength against that of the river. His slim, wiry body bent to the storm.

But it was no use. They had him. Although it wasn't over fifty yards to the other side, it might as well have been as many miles.

He jerked off the slicker, threw it into the water and watched it whirl away. He would lose his horse, probably his life, but better that than a rope in the hands of the angry citizens of Wainright.

He spurred the black into the backwater, where it cut against the bank with less force than the main flood. It was only a foot deep there, but as though realizing its waning strength, the animal balked.

Seddon flung himself from the saddle, jerked off his coat and shirt, tossed them into the water and watched them sucked down by the whirling foam. The black stood trembling, jerking at the reins which Seddon held in his left hand.

"All right, curse you!" Seddon shouted at the horse. "I'll do it alone."

The black, circling to get back to the bank, stepped into the full force of the flood, went under, disappeared almost as quickly as had the yellow slicker and the coat.

Seddon unfastened his guns, threw them far into the torrent. He couldn't pack a useless ounce if he was to make it. He kicked off his boots. He was almost naked now—brute strength against the hellish forces of rampant Nature. He would try it, anyway! Perhaps, if he did make it, they would find the horse and the clothes later, conclude that both mount and rider had perished in the tumultous waters.

Jerry Seddon took a deep breath. Now or never!

Then, with the swift current tugging at his knees, he froze. Somebody was going to try to cross from the opposite side, coming toward him!

The fool—the crazy fool! Only a man whose life was at stake would risk that flood.

The wind, tugging at the garments of the rider on the opposite bank, whisked away a hat. Long hair whipped into the wind.

Good Lord! A girl!

"Go back!" he yelled, as she spurred her mount into the water. He cupped his hands, trying to catch her attention, realized that the wind split the words into indistinguishable sound.

She didn't hear him. Worse, she couldn't see or realize that the water in the center of the channel was moving twice as fast as in the lee of the bend where she had forced the horse down the crumbling red clay bank.

Ignoring the fact that the posse was gaining on him by the minute, Seddon

flung himself into the stream. He would catch the outer swirl of the water before the girl did, be down-stream before she reached the full force of the current.

Even as he felt the surging flood engulf him, he saw her horse go under. An instant later her dark head, a tiny spot against a background of roiling brown, was twenty feet from the threshing legs of the horse.

Jagged stumps tore at Seddon's bare skin, left long, bleeding marks that he did not feel. There was but one chance—an eddy, a backwater further down. If she could hold out—

He lashed out valiantly with arms that were puny as a babe's when pitted against the force of the river. Again and again the cruel undercurrents dragged him down. Again and again he fought his way up.

Then, suddenly, he felt the drag of the water lessen, fought with all his strength to get out of the main pull of the stream. He sensed the rushing tumult slacking, realized that a turn in the river had thrown him toward the opposite side as if he were a piece of driftwood.

The girl! What of her?

BEATEN, bruised, he fought his way into the shallows of the backwater, his scarred body bleeding, smeared with mud. She couldn't have made it! He had scarcely made it himself!

A flick of white in that rolling upheaval of reddish brown caught his eye. There it was again—it was the girl!

Summoning the last bit of his strength, he edged into the current above her, cut a flat arc. His hand touched her waist, and he grabbed. The current had them now, but gradually he worked toward the cutbanks, flung his burden on a mud bar, and dropped beside her, the surging waters still dragging at his bare feet. In spite of the cold, pelting rain, though, somehow he managed to pick the unconscious girl up, climb slitheringly up the bank, lay her down on safer ground. Where he was, he hadn't the slightest idea, but wherever it was it wasn't far enough away from the scene of the bank holdup and gunfight.

Although he was half naked, cold, and bruised Seddon realized that he couldn't leave the girl as she was. But he hadn't the strength to carry her.

She was coming to, now. She opened her eyes, and even in her bedraggled, mud-smeared condition, he realized that she was young, pretty.

"Then—then I made it?" she asked haltingly.

"Made what, Miss?" Seddon countered.

"I—I got across? Thank God. I can go on to Wainright now, and—"

Something in his expression must have told her that her surmise was incorrect. She stared at the rushing waters, her slight shoulders drooping in resignation.

"Sorry, Miss," Seddon said slowly. "I reckon you must have wanted powerful bad to cross, tackling the Republican in full flood. I was on the other side. I tried to warn you back. You couldn't hear me. Then when I saw your horse go under, I sort of—"

"I'll try it again," she said, determinedly. "I've got to get to Wainright—to a doctor!"

"I'm afraid you couldn't make it, Ma'am," said Seddon, conscious now for the first time of his lack of clothing. "Not before tomorrow, anyhow."

"Tomorrow will be too late," she said, flatly. "I've got to get to Doc Wilson—"

"No man, doctor or otherwise, could make it through that flood," he countered. "My getting through was just luck."

"Then my father will die," she said flatly. "There's only one man who could help Dad. That man is Doc Wilson, of Wainright. He'd come to my father through hell."

"Your father's been hurt?" inquired Seddon.

She stood up, faced him squarely. "He was shot," she answered. "Gunned by a man who hated him—and feared him."

"Maybe I could help, Ma'am," Seddon offered, forgetting his own troubles. "I'm a right smart hand with gun hurts. What's your dad's name, and where is he?"

"I'm Jane Whitlock," she said. "My father is Jim Whitlock and he's hiding up on Cougar Hill."

"Jim Whitlock!"

The words slipped softly from Jerry Seddon's lips. Whitlock! Renegade. Outlaw. And he was this girl's father.

"Show me the way," he said. "I'll do the best I can."

She looked at him quizzically for a moment, then: "Maybe I shouldn't have told you," she said hesitantly. "You might be the law, and my father—"

"It's all right, Ma'am," he assured her. "I'm pretty badly wanted my ownself right now. I had a darned good reason for chancing it across the river. I was trying to save myself as well as you."

They were hidden in behind some brush upon the river's bank. He pointed to the opposite bank.

A dozen men of the posse that had been following him were riding up and down, scouring for sign, shaking their heads dubiously as though to indicate that there couldn't be much hope for a man who had tried to cross the flooded stream.

"Looks like Sheriff Erskine and his men," the girl said, peering through the rain. "They're looking for you?"

He nodded. Questions glinted in her eyes, but she did not ask them.

"The bank at Wainright," he answered her unspoken question, and wondered why he was telling her. "They tried to hold it up this afternoon."

"You—had a part in it?"

He shook his head.

"Not knowingly," he answered. "But I was there, and I'll be blamed for what happened."

Even as they watched the men across the river, it seemed that they had decided to give up the search.

"And you're outside the law," she said slowly, and Seddon sensed that in her mind was the thought that if ever another man stood outside the law, that man was her own father.

Silently he took her arm and helped her through the slithering mud to higher ground.

CHAPTER II

An "Outlaw" Passes

FOR half an hour they beat through the storm, finally reaching a small homesteader's cabin.

"These people will help us," Jane said. "They're friends of my father."

Jerry Seddon had always had a stockman's dislike of "sod-busters." To his way of thinking, they were usurping the range, breaking up the pasturage. Yet he found these people friendly and considerate, within their limited resources. From them he and Jane got dry clothes, horses.

Cleaned of the muck and mud of the river, Jane Whitlock was lovely. She was slender, lithe, and in her dark eyes shone intelligence, determination. She was a girl, Jerry Seddon decided, for a man to tie to. A girl who would side a man through hell and high water, even as she was then fighting for her father.

An hour later, they were on their way again. The rain had stopped. Low lying cloud banks rimmed the distant hills.

Onto higher and higher ground they pressed until finally they stopped before an old line shack, far off beaten paths.

Jerry Seddon had been puzzled over the girl's statement that the homesteaders were friends of her father. He had heard plenty about Jim Whitlock, and all of it bad. The man had been a thorn in the side of the cattle interests for years—rustling, raiding—as elusive as the will-o'-the-wisp. But Seddon remembered now that never once had he ever heard of the outlaw bothering the poor settlers or small spread owners. In fact, he was something of a modern Robin Hood.

Seddon's real surprise, however, was at himself and his own willingness in throwing in with the girl. He must be getting soft. What difference should it make to him if an old outlaw was near death?

Outlaw! The word burned like a hot branding iron. That was what he was! Fer-

vently he cursed Buck Trenton. A week ago Seddon had been a happy, carefree puncher without a worry in the world except to find the man who—

His thoughts broke off as the girl led him into the line cabin.

He stared down at Jim Whitlock. No doctor could do this oldster any good. The stamp of death was already on his thin old grizzled face. He was past human aid.

"I couldn't get Doc Wilson, Dad," said the girl. "The river was up. I would have gone under, except for this man—"

Suddenly she seemed to realize that she did not even know her rescuer's name.

"Jerry Seddon," he said. "I been riding for the Eighty-eight spread until—well, until—"

There was a queer expression in the fever-bright eyes of the oldster.

"Until Buck Trenton tried to hold up the Drovers' Bank today in Wainright?" he asked.

Seddon was startled. How could this man, dying from a bullet wound, know anytihng about an attempted robbery only a few hours ago?

Whitlock seemed to sense that query.

"I reckon he didn't get away with it, did he?"

"He didn't get away with it," Seddon repeated, mechanically. "But how did you know?"

The old man smiled wanly.

"Buck Trenton was here last night," he said, as though the effort to speak was costing him much of his rapidly ebbing strength. "He wanted me to throw in with him. It was no dice, and I told him so. I've done a lot of things in my time, fella, but robbing banks wasn't one of 'em. When I told him so, he threw down on me. That's why—"

HE STOPPED, the effort of talking apparently too much of a strain for him.

Seddon wondered at his speaking so casually of Buck Trenton, as though he had known him for a long time.

"You'd better let me look at that slug hole, old-timer," he said. Then to the girl: "Get me some hot water and—"

The dying outlaw shook his head as the girl went out. "Don't waste your time, Seddon," he whispered. "I'm throwed—and I know it." He breathed heavily for a moment. "Seddon. Seddon—"

He seemed to be trying to remember something. He looked glassily at the young cowboy. "Ever have any folks over Twin Mountain way?"

"Yes," answered Seddon. "My dad had a small spread over there. He was killed in a fight with some sodbusters."

The outlaw smiled, wearily. "Always the same old story, Seddon," he said, his breathing raspy now. "Sodbusters, homesteaders, nesters—" He smiled a little, a tired look about his mouth. "Your dad wasn't killed by sodbusters, fella. He was killed by a bunch of renegades hired by the Wicklin Pool outfit to wipe out the sodbusters. They thought your dad was friendly with the nesters because he was friendly with me, and I—"

Seddon's lips tightened. "Who did it, Whitlock?" he asked, his voice taut, strained. "Who killed my father? I've looked for that man for three years!"

The ghost of a smile flitted across the pale lips of the dying man. "And all the time you was working elbow-to-elbow with him on the Eighty-eight spread."

"Trenton!" Seddon mouthed the name as though it were an oath.

"Trenton," echoed the old outlaw. "Trenton was hired by the Wicklin Pool to run the sodbusters out—just like he's been hired by Mace Holt and the Hazeltine Pool over in Wainright now. That bank robbery was a frameup, Seddon. They thought I'd walk into the trap. I didn't. Then, something must have happened. Maybe Buck tried to doublecross his own bosses, make the bank robbery a real one."

"And five men are dead," breathed Seddon, huskily. "Because Buck Trenton—"

THE GIRL came back from the kitchen with the hot water, holding it out to

Jerry Seddon.

"Five men," whispered old Whitlock. "What's that to Trenton, whose hands are bloody with the lives of dozens of nesters. And there will be dozens more unless he's stopped." His voice grew barely audible. "That's what I was fighting, fella. That's why they outlawed me. I was taking up for the little fellas—the sodbusters. And now it's too late—and I didn't finish my job."

"It ain't too late!" Seddon said hoarsely. "I'm taking up where you left off. I'm taking up for the little fellas—and for my dad—"

Jane Whitlock dropped the basin of water, flung the back of her hand across her mouth to stifle a scream.

"He's—dead!" she choked.

The young cowboy slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Yes, Jane," he said softly. "But I'm finishing his work. I'm throwing in with the sodbusters until the pool that hires killers like Buck Trenton is busted—until Trenton is dead, or—"

She looked at him, dull-eyed. "It isn't your fight, Jerry Seddon," she said. "You're a cattleman—and cattlemen hate nesters."

"My father didn't," he said, almost savagely. "Neither did your dad. They couldn't both be wrong, Jane."

"You're stepping into plain unadulterated hell, Jerry Seddon," she said, and back of her words seemed a world of experience. "I know, I know what my dad has been through. They'll outlaw you. They'll hound you down like a wild animal."

"I'm outside the law now," he answered, and there was a stubborn set to his jaw, as he pulled the blanket up over the face of the dead outlaw.

She seemed to be studying him, controlling the grief that threatened to engulf her.

"I'm taking up for him," he repeated, "providing you'll stand by, help me contact the folks that depended on him."

"It'll be a long fight," she said, tightly, "with no reward at the end but—"

"I want no reward but one," Seddon said tightly. "To look at Buck Trenton over the sights of a forty-five."

Jane Whitlock had begun to cry. He comforted her as best he could, and standing side by side they said a silent prayer over the body of one who had given his all to his fellowmen—Jim Whitlock. A man who had been called by those who knew him least—who lacked an understanding of the zeal that had driven him to do what he did—outlaw.

Together, the dead man's courageous daughter, and the man who vowed to be his successor, reverently laid Jim Whitlock to rest. Then, with the red sun of dying day behind them, they headed their horses for the flat lands.

CHAPTER III

Substitute Outlaw

LATE THAT evening, Jerry Seddon and Jane returned to the homesteader's cabin where they had borrowed the horses. The sodbuster, Nils Larson, received the news of Whitlock's death with typical Swedish stolidity.

"Yim bane gude man," he said simply. "There bane nobody left to fight Holt and Hazeltine pool. Ay tank lots of us bane lick, now."

"Larson," Seddon said promptly, "I owe somebody something, and I believe in paying my debts. Tomorrow, before the river goes down, we'll get the homesteaders together. I've got something to tell them—a message left by Jim Whitlock."

The Larsons made Seddon and the girl as comfortable for the night as their small quarters would permit.

Early the next morning, Nils, Jane, and the cowboy started rounding up the nesters. By noon, fifty men were gathered at the ranch of Wade Templeton, a few miles from Larson's homestead.

Jerry Seddon told them what had happened—of the murder of his father, of

how he had been roped into the attempt to hold up the bank, of the effort to involve Jim Whitlock in the plot and how the old outlaw had been ruthlessly shot by Buck Trenton.

"That makes me an owlhooter, my own-self," he said. "'Course I'm a cowman, and cowmen ain't supposed to have any love for sodbusters, but there's something more important to me than that, more important even than the difference between being inside the law or out. The man who killed my father, and Jane's father, is still alive—still loose to do his dirty work and kill more people who happen to be in the way of the Hazeltine pool. I'm offering you folks my guns—and I know how to use 'em. I'm offering to take Jim Whitlock's place, far as I'm able. There's only one condition—nobody interferes with me in the handling of Buck Trenton."

There seemed to be plenty of indications of approval of Seddon's proposition. Some were noncommittal. The only flat opposition came from a man in the back of the crowd, a lanky, long-armed nester.

"I'm agin it," he said, unequivocally. "Jim Whitlock was outside the law, but Jim Whitlock was almost a legend in these parts. How do we know this man is what he says? How do we know he ain't a pool spy? Them kind of tricks has been worked before. Mace Holt ain't above such doings. This man's a cowman. How do we know he ain't running a sandy on us?"

It was Jane Whitlock who answered him. "Zeke Carstairs," she said tightly, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself! What has Jerry Seddon got to gain—except the chance to risk his own life fighting our battles? His argument is with Buck Trenton and the Hazeltines. If he feels he can help us at the same time, I say let's accept his offer. He has everything to lose, not even holding an acre of land. We have everything to gain. The fact that he is outside the law shouldn't make any difference. You were glad enough to take my father's help. I say we should take him up on his offer, and be glad to get him. What we need is men who will fight—not talk and bandy words!"

Outpointed, but unconvinced, Zeke Carstairs sat down on a bench against the ranchhouse.

"Ay tank we bane lucky," put in Nils Larson. "Trouble is, we bane farmers, not fighters. Other side bane fighters."

And so, with the exception of Zeke Carstairs and two men who sided with him, the meeting voted vociferously and thankfully to take up Jerry Seddon's proposition.

STANDING with Jane and some of the nesters a few minutes later, Seddon saw Carstairs talking earnestly with one of the men who had voted with him.

"Our friend Carstairs don't seem much in favor of the idea," the cowboy whispered.

Jane colored slightly. "Zeke wouldn't be in favor of anything that put me in the company of another man," she said. "Heaven knows I've never given him any encouragement, and Dad had to tell him twice to stay away from me. I suppose he thinks now that—"

Seddon's teeth clicked together. "He'll have to change his mind," he said, so forcibly that the girl looked up at him quickly, then looked away.

Unaware that Jerry Seddon was watching them, Carstairs and his friend apparently reached some agreement and parted. The man who had been talking with Carstairs went for his horse.

Seddon whistled softly. "So that's the way the wind blows, eh? Well, maybe we better keep an eye on Zeke—just for good luck."

The nesters crowded around then, and the cowboy had no opportunity to say more to Jane.

"You got any plans, Seddon?" asked Wade Templeton, who seemed to be looked up to as a leader. "The pool has notified us if we don't take down our fences, they'll cut 'em down for us."

Seddon smiled grimly. "Cutting down fenceposts ain't healthy—if the cutter's

axe happens to come down on a dynamite cap. Take augers, bore holes in every fifth or sixth post and cover the caps with mud. Then warn the pool men they can cut the fences at their own risk."

Carstairs came up just then. "Your friend that just rode off don't seem in a cooperating mood, Carstairs," Seddon said pointedly.

"He's got stock to tend," replied Zeke, plainly ill at ease.

"It'd go pretty hard with anybody that was planted in this bunch and repping the Hazeltine pool on the QT," said Seddon. "I wouldn't want to be that hombre myself."

Something in the flick of fear that swept through the eyes of Zeke Carstairs set Seddon to wondering if he had, accidentally, come close to a truth.

"All you men who can, be here tomorrow," he announced, as the meeting broke up. "The river will be down by then, and if Sheriff Erskine and the Hazeltine men are on the prod, we'll be ready for them."

They agreed enthusiastically and the meeting broke up.

"But Jerry," protested the girl, "you can't be here if Sheriff Erskine and his men—"

"Why not?" he asked her. "Only one man knows I was with the riders who came into Wainright yesterday. All the others are dead. That one man is Buck Trenton. All anybody saw of me was a yellow slicker and black horse. They're both under the river quicksands now. If the sheriff comes looking for Jerry Seddon, then I'll know that Buck Trenton is playing the pool's hand." He paused, thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing. "Somehow," he said slowly, "I hope he is."

THE GRAY dawn was barely streaking the eastern sky the next morning at the Larson place when Jerry Seddon was awakened by voices—Larson's and that of another man whose words quickly dispelled all doubt as to his identity.

"We know Seddon is here, Larson," he heard the man saying. "I'm the sheriff of this county, and I want him."

That instantly settled two things in Seddon's mind. Buck Trenton had talked—and somebody had got word to the sheriff that Seddon was with the nesters, with the Larsons. It could only be the man who had been talking to Carstairs!

"Come out, Seddon," yelled Sheriff Erskine. "Give yourself up and I'll guarantee a fair trial. The place is surrounded. I've got a warrant for your arrest—for murder."

They had worked fast—too fast. Jerry Seddon did not even have a gun. He had thrown his own weapons in the river the day before.

Awakened by the sound of voices, Jane came from the other leanto where she had been sleeping with Mrs. Larson and one of the children.

"Jerry," she whispered tersely, "what is it?"

"The sheriff," he answered, his voice low. "They got me—without a gun—"

She went back into the leanto, returned almost at once, handed him a gun-belt and two six-shooters.

"Dad's," she said rapidly. "But, Jerry, they've never been turned against a lawman. Unless your life is at stake—"

His right arm circled her, held her close. "Unless my life is at stake," he repeated, "they'll not be turned against the law."

The sheriff was pounding on the door. "Open up, or we'll break it down, Larson! You'd better come out, Seddon—with your hands over your head."

Jerry Seddon glanced out the side window. One of the sheriff's men left his horse with reins, dragging, while he sided the sheriff at the front door. It was a desperate chance, but Jerry Seddon had no idea of calmly submitting—not as long as Buck Trenton was alive.

"Take it easy, Sheriff," he shouted, motioning Larson away from the door.

He strapped the guns to his waist, picked up a heavy stool.

"Get down on the floor, Jane," he ordered the girl. "If I make it, I'll be at the meeting at noon. I've got something to take up with Zeke Carstairs!"

Again the pounding on the door.

"Reach up and rattle the lock, Nils," Seddon whispered. "Make out you're going to open up."

He hurled the stool through the glass window frame, dived headlong after it through the sash. If his ruse had worked, they were expecting him at the door.

"There he goes!" a raucous voice shouted, as he flung himself onto the horse, grabbed the reins, and beat a tattoo on the animal's sides with his heels.

Bullets whined over his head as he laid himself flat along the neck of the racing animal. The pound of hoofs, the spiteful flash of barking six-guns. A bullet grazed his arm. He laughed and rode the opposite side of the horse, Indian fashion.

Although Seddon did not know it, a man who stood in a bunch of mesquite, fifty yards from the house, lowered a Winchester slowly because he couldn't put a bead on the indistinct form flashing through the morning half-light.

"You made it this time, blast you!" muttered Buck Trenton. "But you're the only man that knows I was in Wainright yesterday, and that's just one man too many."

CHAPTER IV

Counter-Play

IT WASN'T hard for Jerry Seddon to figure out how the sheriff had located him so promptly. He could see now that the whole proposition of the bank raid the day before had been elaborately staged by Mace Holt, the head of the Hazeltine pool, with the connivance of Buck Trenton, for the sole purpose of luring Jim Whitlock into a trap and wiping out the champion of the Hayes Valley nesters in one bold move. Trenton had probably figured that Whitlock would welcome the chance to strike at the pool, and at the same time garner money for the nesters to carry on the fight.

Jerry was a little puzzled, however, over the fact that the plan had been put into operation without Whitlock, unless Trenton, believing that the old outlaw had died of his gun wounds the night before, had decided to put through the raid without Whitlock and then claim that the outlaw had been killed in the gunfight, but that he had first hidden the money.

If that had been the plan, something had gone wrong. If Trenton had figured on crossing his employers, they might have figured on crossing him. The reception accorded the men who had ridden into town off the Eighty-eight spread with Buck Trenton had been entirely too well timed and executed to have been the result of mere chance.

Just what had happened inside the bank, Seddon didn't know. Trenton had left the Eighty-eight riders at the hitch-rail in front of the Drover's Bank. The next thing Jerry Seddon had known was that there had been shots, Buck Trenton had come out with a mask over his face and the battle was on—a battle that had wiped out every one of the Eighty-eight riders except Trenton and Seddon, and had left the two employees of the bank sprawled on the floor, weltering in their own blood. Seddon had caught a fleeting glimpse of that picture before he grasped the situation and rode out of town hell for leather.

But perhaps Trenton had doubled back and taken up his role again as troubleshooter for the pool, and had in some way identified Jerry Seddon as one of the men who had been involved in the hold-up. Certainly Sheriff Erskine wouldn't have been able to point so unerringly toward Seddon. But there was more than that to it, for somebody—apparently one of the nesters—had tipped off the sheriff where Jerry might be found. That meant a traitor—and Seddon had a pretty good idea that Zeke Carstairs was the man.

With that figured out, Jerry Seddon doubled back to Wade Templeton's place, and laid the whole story before him. Templeton's conclusions were quick, vitriolic.

"I've been suspicious of that skunk Zeke

Carstairs for a long time," he said. "As long as Jim Whitlock was alive, Zeke kept pretty quiet. I was plumb surprised to hear him declare himself as much as he did yesterday afternoon."

For a long time the two men sat with their heads close together, while Templeton outlined the history of the nester-Hazeltine pool war that had been going on for months.

"We have no proof, Templeton," Seddon said then, "that Zeke Carstairs is the man who is spying for the pool. If he is the snake that's been tipping off the moves of the sodbusters, it pretty well explains why so many of your plans have gone hay-wire. But more than that, there's a tie-up somewhere between him and Buck Trenton. Carstairs is a yellow dog who wouldn't have the nerve to put a gun in a man's back and pull the trigger. But he might point out your men who have been the most active, and Trenton wouldn't mind spilling their blood."

WADE Templeton nodded sagely. "You may be right, Seddon," he said, his voice harsh. "It don't seem just happenstance that the three men that have been killed off in the last two months by bushwhackers just happened to be the ones that was most active in bucking the pool." He looked at Seddon with a queer expression. "Me taking old Hank Singletary's place now—it wouldn't be surprising if I'd be the next."

"We've got to block their next move, Templeton," said Seddon, "and I think we can do it. The one thing the pool ain't expecting is for the sodbusters to give up. If you'll get hold of Carstairs, hint around that you might sell out to the pool, tell Zeke that I've dragged my rope—hightailed—we might force their hand."

Templeton looked serious. "My life wouldn't be worth a nickel if my neighbors suspected me of doing a thing like that," he said.

"It won't be worth a nickel if Trenton throws down on you from a cut-bank when you ain't expecting a slug in the back," countered Seddon.

"The men'll be here by noon," he suggested, as he went toward his horse. "Get hold of Carstairs in the meantime and see if you can make him tip his hand. If I can find Trenton, it may not be necessary—"

There was a grim set to his thinned lips as he forked his horse and rode away....

But if Sheriff Erskine had any idea of locating Jerry Seddon somewhere in the open country after the young cowboy had slipped out of the trap at the Larson place, the peace officer did nothing that would indicate that fact. An hour later, from a point of vantage, Seddon saw the sheriff and half a dozen of his men heading back toward Wainright.

"And I couldn't even guess who'll be the maddest," muttered Seddon, as he watched the officer and his men cross the river. "Mace Holt or Buck Trenton."

Even though the chance of locating Trenton was pretty slim, the dodging waddy put in the whole morning scouting around, being careful to keep out of sight of the nesters, for he didn't want to spoil Templeton's story that he had skipped out.

It was nearly noon when he returned to the Templeton place, slipped into the yard unnoticed and hid in the barn where he could see and hear everything that happened in the yard.

Wade Templeton, he decided, when the nester began to talk, should have been an actor.

"I don't know what's keeping Seddon," Templeton told the thirty or forty men who had assembled in accordance with the outlawed cowboy's suggestion of the day before.

"I'll tell you what's happened to him," Zeke Carstairs spoke up hotly. "Sheriff Erskine came to the Larson place this morning with a warrant for him. Your big-talking champion has trailed his rope."

Jane Whitlock, unaware that Jerry Seddon was within miles, turned on Carstairs angrily. "That's not true, Zeke," she blazed, "and you know it! Something has happened."

"Sure it has," he drawled confidently.

"You fell in love with him. But even that wasn't enough to hold him."

Somebody guffawed, and the girl turned crimson. Zeke went on.

"We been fighting this thing out long enough to prove to ourselves that we can't lick the pool men!" he shouted. "I talked to one of Holt's men this morning and he offered me a fair price for my land, so—"

There were angry rumblings, and Carstairs added hastily: " 'Course I told him I wouldn't do nothing unless all the rest was willing."

His eyes flicked over the crowd. It had been a long fight, a hard fight, and one that had been almost hopeless. There were men in that crowd who were thinking of their wives and kids, the opportunity of getting enough money to try again somewhere else. Zeke Carstairs knew that, and he knew that if he could get others to thinking along the same line, the solid front of the nesters would be broken.

"You men without wives and kids," he shouted, "ain't in the same position of them who have 'em. Those wives and kids got a right to expect something more than gun-smoke and killing!"

He was interrupted by the calm voice of Annie Larson, Nils' wife.

"Ay tank maybe you not know what you talk about," she said flatly. "You got no wife an' kids. Me, I fight yust so long as Nils."

THERE were murmurs of assent from other women in the group, then Templeton played his ace.

"How do we know they'd keep their word if we did sell out?" he asked. "Who's the man that made the offer? Where does he stand with Holt?"

Carstairs, believing that the crowd was coming his way, said: "Every man that goes into town this afternoon will be paid off, before he leaves his land. That's fair, ain't it?"

There was a stir as Jerry Seddon dropped out of his hiding place, strode toward Carstairs.

"You heard Templeton's question, Zeke," he said, his voice as cold as ice. "He asked you who was the man that made the offer? Are you answering him? Who was it?"

Carstairs' face blanched, but Seddon went on inexorably.

"I told you yesterday, Carstairs," he said, and bit the words off savagely, "that I wouldn't want to be in the shoes of the hombre that was selling out his neighbors. You sent word to town where I was holed in. The man that made you that proposition was the man that sent the sheriff. Who was it?"

"You can't scare me, Seddon!" Carstairs tried to bluster, but his voice quavered, and his big hands were trembling. "You're wearing Jim Whitlock's guns, but you ain't the man he was, and you never will be. Go ahead and throw down on me—I ain't got a gun. Couldn't use it if I had one."

Seddon unbuckled the gun-belt, handed the guns to Jane.

"You outweigh me twenty pounds, Carstairs," he said tightly. "Don't tell me you can't use your fists either."

His right fist shot out, smacked hard against Zeke Carstairs' jaw.

"Who made you the proposition?" Seddon demanded.

Carstairs lunged heavily. This was his game—rough and tumble. In it he saw a chance to vanquish Jerry Seddon once and for all. But Seddon seemed to have moved, and Carstairs' arms closed on thin air.

Smack!

The cowboy's left swung as he sidestepped the rush, and the force of the lanky nester's rush added impetus to the contact. Carstairs went down and like a flash Seddon was upon him, pinioning him flat on his back.

"Who was the man?" Seddon repeated, slapping Carstairs across the face with his open hand. "Tell—or I'll slap it out of you."

Zeke Carstairs was whimpering. Finally it came.

"Buck Trenton."

Jerry Seddon stood up, his eyes mere slits.

"Trenton!" he repeated, glancing over the waiting, watching group of nesters. "Men, you promised. No interference in my handling of Trenton. There's one thing the pool don't expect—that you'll accept the offer. We're heading for town."

"You can't do that, Seddon!" someone shouted. "We wouldn't take their dirty money!"

"I ain't asking you to," he shouted. "I'm asking you to back my play by making 'em think you're going to. Don't you see the setup? If twenty-five of you men went to town together they'd say you was raiding town. How many of you do you think would come back?"

"But you said—"

"We're sending in a note to Buck Trenton, signed by Carstairs. It'll say that you're accepting the proposition—that Buck Trenton is to act as spokesman for the pool and meet you men at the edge of town—that you'll appoint a spokesman to deal with him."

Seddon took the guns Jane was holding. "And you're going to be that man?" she whispered to him.

He nodded, then shot a command over to the nester he had just whipped. "Start writing, Zeke.

"That note'll take them by surprise, Jane," Seddon whispered to the girl. "They'll call a meeting first off. I aim to find out what happens at that meeting."

She caught her breath with a quick intake. "They'll kill you!"

He shook his head. "Not unless they see me—and I'll try to avoid that. But they'll try some trick and we'll need every available man. Templeton will take our men to a spot close to town *before* they get together. Keep them out of sight in case of a trap. Trenton will try something, there's no question about that."

He looked deep into the eyes of the girl as he left.

"Good luck, Jerry," she said simply.

"Get that note into town right away," was his parting admonition to the nesters. "I can't take it, but I'll be waiting for its effect."

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER V

The Winning Play

JERRY SEDDON rode into town from the north, put his horse in an unused shed, pulled his hatbrim low and avoided people with whom he came in contact on the streets. He saw the messenger from the nesters ride into town with the acceptance note, deliver it, and ride out again without waiting for an answer—for no answer was expected.

Mace Holt was in the bank when he got the note, and wasted no time in getting Sheriff Erskine and Buck Trenton into the back room of the Chinese restaurant. From a point of vantage outside the window, Seddon listened.

It was all he could do to refrain from breaking in on the conference and having it out with Buck Trenton then and there, but he realized that for the moment his own desires would have to be sublimated until the cause of those for whom he was fighting was won.

Mace Holt wet his dry lips, looked at Trenton. "I didn't think they'd take it up, Buck," he said tightly. "Why, it'd cost fifty thousand dollars to make that play. How'd we explain it to Warrick and Traymore, the heads of the pool? They've been yelling their heads off anyway about this nester proposition and the way it's been handled. The first thing we know they'll jump the traces on us, and then—"

He stopped short in contemplation of what seemed to be a mighty unpleasant prospect.

Buck Trenton grinned savagely. "Who said anything about paying 'em off," he snapped. "We're in this thing now—might as well go through with it. That wasn't the reason I made the proposition. To take it up, they'll have to come to town. What's the sense of cutting them down one at a time when the whole bunch is waiting to be wiped out? There was only two men could put fight into them anyway

—Jim Whitlock and Seddon. Whitlock's dead, and Seddon has trailed his rope."

Mace Holt, a long-legged, cadaverous man with deep-set eyes, the man whose air for organization had first set the idea of the Hazeltine pool into operation, and whose ruthless disregard for others had kept it going long after Warrick and Traymore would have dropped the idea, looked at Sheriff Erskine questioningly.

"I'd feel a lot surer about this man Seddon if you hadn't bobbled about bringing him in from Larson's place after Carstairs tipped us off he was there," he said, a note of complaint in his voice.

"He's dragged his pin, I tell you!" Buck Trenton insisted. "These danged nesters have played right into our hands. All we got to do now is have the sheriff deputize ten men I can name, go out there and—"

Erskine's cheeks blanched. He was not above ordinary skulduggery on behalf of Mace Holt and the pool, but Trenton's plan was nothing less than wholesale murder.

"They came to town looking for trouble—that'll be our story," said Trenton, as he rolled a cigarette, speaking with no more concern than he would have manifested in discussing the butchering of beef. "They fired on lawmen—I'll get a couple of our boys into the crowd to pull the stunt. The sheriff ordered them to break it up, and they didn't and—" He inhaled deeply, forced the smoke through his nostrils. "The rest was just too bad."

"Warrick and Traymore won't stand for no such mass murder," protested Mace Holt.

"Warrick and Traymore won't know nothing about it," Trenton said callously. "Keep them in your office until the job is done. It'll settle the pool troubles once and for all—an' with everything clear. Warrick and Traymore'll get over it."

Peering under the edge of the window shade, Jerry Seddon saw a glance pass between Buck Trenton and Mace Holt that indicated the pair had some arrangements of their own that did not include their work for the pool.

Seddon's hands dropped to his guns, gripped the butts, but again he controlled his impulse to break in and face the trio. Gun action now would solve nothing.

Holt apparently was not altogether in favor of the plan, seemed to hesitate about giving his okay.

"What's the matter, Mace?" sneered Trenton. "Losing your nerve?"

Mace Holt didn't seem to resent that slur, seeming more concerned with some other thought. And Jerry Seddon realized that if Holt had used his position to pick up options and assignments from the smaller pool members, crossing his employers at the final showdown, he might be able to out-vote the two largest holders in the pool—Warrick and Traymore.

"All right," Holt said finally, his voice husky, "play it your way."

The sheriff looked dubious. "They want you should act as spokesman according to the note," he said. "That's going to put you in between on any gun play—"

"I'll fix that," snapped Trenton. "When I go out to talk to them, one of our own reps will take a shot at me from the crowd. That'll be your signal to cut loose—and mine to drop into the clear. There'll be no more sodbuster trouble five minutes after that."

He got to his feet and said savagely, as he left the room: "I said I'd bust up this nester outfit, just the same as I busted up the Wickling pool, by getting rid of old man Seddon."

At that moment, as Buck Trenton strode out of the room, he was unknowingly very close to death....

TWENTY-FIVE men followed the line of the cut-banks of Cottonwood Creek until they were close to the town of Wainright. There they halted until Jerry Seddon, slipping out of town in full possession of the scheme concocted by Buck Trenton, joined them.

Seddon sent the main body of men into cover along the creek banks, took Templeton and went to a spot where he judged Trenton would try to put his gun-slicks into a place of vantage for the carnage.

Templeton, a close-lipped man, waited

patiently, but finally asked: "Just what's the plan, Jerry?"

"Shhh!" warned Seddon, indicating the rocks where the would-be killers were placing themselves in advantageous positions. Wade Templeton swore fervently, if quietly.

"I might have knowed they'd try some trick like bushwhacking!" His hand dropped to his gun.

"Curse 'em, Seddon!" he said, tightly. "Our men are tired of being murdered one by one. We'll fight! We'll clean up the town and—Why, we outnumber them three to one."

"If you outnumber them ten to one, you'd get the worst of it," Seddon flatly declared. "You've got a bunch of farmers, men that don't know guns. They've got gun-slicks. We'll fight, but a different way. Trenton controls that bunch. If we go into an open fight, there'll be men killed whose families need 'em. Kids will be orphaned. Me, I can afford to take the chance. Trenton killed my father, and I'm going to kill Trenton!" His throat tightened as he thought of Jane. "Go back to the bunch," he told Templeton. "They'll send somebody ahead to lead you into the trap. Bring up six men—no more—and ask them to send Trenton out to rep for them. Leave the rest to me."

"You're going to—" Templeton bit the question short at the look in Seddon's eyes.

"Bushwhack a bushwhacker?" the cowboy asked bitterly. "Nope! He'll get what he never gave any of the men he killed—a chance. I want him to know who kills him—if I can—and it's him instead of me."

Whatever else might be said of Buck Trenton, he could put on a show of bravado for the benefit of an audience. He rode out boldly toward the half dozen men Templeton sent up.

"Well, come on, you nesters!" he yelled. "Don't you want to sell out? You'll have to come into town for the money. Where's the rest of them, Templeton? Too bad you ain't got Seddon to rep for you. I could do business with that jasper if—"

He had dismounted and stood fifty yards from Templeton. He did not see or hear Seddon approach.

"Your trick ain't going to work, Buck," said Jerry Seddon, ice in his voice. "Your bushwhackers are too far back to help, and Carstairs and your other two men are tied up."

Trenton spun around and saw Seddon. "The deal's off," he said to Templeton, but his eyes never left the cowboy.

"You bet it's off!" snapped Seddon. "I heard that talk you and them other two made in the Chinese restaurant. While you and Erskine was rounding up your gun-slicks, Warrick and Traymore and me had a talk with Mace Holt in the bank. He gave up his options and we gave him five minutes to get out of town. He also told us his deal with you. The Hazeltine pool is dissolved, Buck—by the men who made it and got tricked into letting you and Mace Holt handle it."

BUCK TRENTON'S hand stabbed for a gun. But Jerry Seddon's fingers moved with the speed of light and one of the big six-guns that had ridden on Jim Whitlock's thighs for so many years, belched flame. The gun went spinning out of Trenton's hand.

"You'd done better to have killed me, Seddon," he said, his look dazed. "I'll get you sooner or later."

"I could have killed you, Trenton," said Seddon, "and been justified, but I had something to tell you first. I heard you admit you killed my father. And something else. Jim Whitlock lived long enough to tell who shot him."

"You've got no proof!"

"All I want. Take Trenton's guns, Templeton. I'm going to kill him with my bare hands. Go back to the others and don't interfere. That was our deal. Here's my own guns."

Reluctantly, Templeton obeyed.

"You danged fool!" snarled Trenton. "I got you—"

His uninjured hand flashed to a hold-out gun inside his shirt. But Seddon grabbed that hand just in time.

"I thought you'd do that!" he gritted.

"I knew that gun was there!"

Beads of sweat stood out on Trenton's face as he tried to release his hands from Seddon's grip. Already his forefinger was on the trigger.

Bit by bit Seddon's fingers tightened, slipped more and more toward Trenton's trigger finger. Second by second Trenton realized the superior strength of his opponent, and then, suddenly, he realized the import of what Seddon was doing. He was going to make Trenton kill himself with his own gun!

Seddon's teeth bared as the flick of terror in the eyes of the other man told Seddon that Trenton sensed his plan.

"Even your friend the sheriff won't be able to avenge your going, Trenton," he rasped. "I ain't got a gun—I gave it to Templeton, and everybody knows you carried that hold-out."

A quarter of an inch at a time, Seddon turned the killer's wrist.

"Not that, Seddon!" Trenton pleaded. "Look! I've got money hidden out. We'll split it—"

"Blood money!" Seddon said, between his teeth. "Money you got for bushwhacking men. There's a dozen more men behind me, begging me to pull that trigger."

Abruptly he caught the pound of oncoming hoofs. In a flicking glance, he saw that it was Jane.

Trenton lurched, tried to jerk away, fell, pulling the cowboy down on top of him.

As they fell, there was a muffled explosion, and Trenton went limp.

Jane flung herself from the horse, stared at the body of Buck Trenton.

"Jerry," she choked. "I didn't want his blood on your hands! The law—" She stared straight into his eyes. "You didn't—"

"I don't know," he answered, truthfully. "I wanted to. I tried to. But... Look!"

He pointed to the gun clasped in Trenton's hand, the index finger still on the trigger.

Others came racing up, nesters, men from town, Warrick and Traymore of the Hazeltine pool.

"Looks like Trenton committed suicide," said Templeton, as though daring anyone to contradict.

Josh Warrick held up his hand. "Wait a minute, men," he said to the nesters. "You don't need to go into town now. There ain't going to be no trouble. Them that's been making it is gone, and the Hazeltine pool is dissolved. The cattlemen are ready to deal. All we ask is you appoint a man who knows what we need—what we have to have. We'll deal square. The pool didn't countenance these killings. All we want is travelway for our stock—and peace."

"We want Jerry Seddon to rep for us," half a dozen men shouted.

SHERIFF ERSKINE seemed to think it time to show his remaining vestige of authority. "Wait a minute," he said. "Seddon's wanted for holding up the bank, and for murder."

Josh Warrick's face was stern. "You mean he was," he corrected. "He won't be when Mace Holt's signed confession is made public. Mace and Trenton framed that play. If I was you, Erskine, I'd be figgering on a place to trail my rope to. There's going to be a new sheriff of this county *muy pronto.*"

Off at one side of the crowd, Jerry Seddon stood beside Jane. "Looks like the boys want me to go into town and deal with Warrick an' Traymore for 'em," he said. "I reckon I can just about get anything I ask for from them for the sodbusters. I ain't got nothing to ask for my ownself except—"

There was a look in his eyes she had no trouble translating. "I think you could get most anything you wanted from anybody, Jerry," she said, softly, "if you'd ask for it."

And Jerry Seddon, forgetting all eyes were on them, took her in his arms and kissed her.

At the cheer that went up, it was hard to tell who colored most—Jerry Seddon or Jane.

Old Lobo bared his teeth at Big Red

The WOLF of SPOOK CANYON

By NORMAN E. BACON

UNDENIABLY "Big Red" Badger was in a hole and he was mighty uncomfortable about it. And as usual, when Red was embarrassed, he was getting mad. His red hair was bristling over his square face, and the crimson was coming up his neck.

"Money!" he roared. "Money! What kind of hands have I got, anyway? I feed them, don't I? I told them they'd get their pay come fall roundup!"

"Jumpy" Hogarth, Red's bowlegged, wizened little foreman hitched uneasily at his pants in the morning sunlight of the Tipsy T ranchyard.

"They're runnin' low on tobacco," Jumpy said. "And a couple of them got the bright light and poker hand itch."

"Bah!" Red snorted. He felt mighty bad about not paying the boys; he knew they must be hard up or they wouldn't have sent Jumpy to him. But Red was temporarily short of cash and he was too bull-headed and stubborn to show any soft-

Deep in a wild gorge, Big Red Badger defies fate as he struggles to bag the thousand-dollar pelt of Old Lobo!

ness. To cover up his feelings, he frowned fiercely at Jumpy.

"How much do I owe those spavined-up post-hole diggers?" he asked.

"About eight hundred fifty dollars," Jumpy said.

"Eight hundred and fifty dollars!" Red howled. "How'd they get backed up against me for that much?"

"Of course we could let a couple of them go," Jumpy said slyly, studying the branches of the battered old oak above Red's head. "Say Slim and Zeke."

"Let them go!" Red really hit the roof. "The two best riders north of the border, and you want to let them go!" He cussed a minute, then glanced suspiciously at Jumpy. "What're you grinnin' about?" he asked. Jumpy sobered instantly and some of the anger left Red. "Hang it, Jumpy," he said. "The boys got to have smokin'." He made a couple of strides across the yard and kicked irritably at a milk can.

Red had got caught in a drop in beef prices and had seen his bank balance nearly wiped out. It wasn't his fault he was behind on his payroll; but he knew his boys were loyal to him, and it hurt his feeling to see them broke, too. He'd been scratching his head for a month to raise the money; but now he found himself no nearer to the solution of his problem than before. He swung back to Jumpy.

"I got a box of chewin' in the house," he said. "They can smoke that, if they're men enough. You got any more bad news?"

JUMPY took off his hat and mopped his brow. It was hot in August. The perspiration stood out on the sharp, lined face.

"Tex found another calf killed," he said. "That dratted wolf again. Turned lobo complete."

Red cursed. The depredations of the lone ranging old gray wolf were getting to be a sore spot in the whole country. He killed new born calves, apparently out of sheer savagery, since he seldom touched the meat. Red knew of at least ten of his calves that had met death at the hands of the old killer. Other ranches had suffered similar losses.

"Wait a minute," Red said. An idea was being born in his mind. "Didn't the ranchers offer a thousand-dollar reward for old Lobo's scalp?"

A shade of worry touched Jumpy's brow as he caught the import of Red's words. "Now wait a minute, boss," he said. "We ain't wolf hunters. The Indians have been after him for a month and haven't got within a mile of him."

"Indians!" Red snorted contemptuously. He slapped a big hand resoundingly against his jeans. Right now a thousand dollars looked mighty big, and he wasn't going to be talked out of it. "Get our horses, Jumpy. We just turned wolf hunters!"

But Jumpy held back. "Boss," he protested. "This is Sunday. I've ridden so much my calluses are scratchin' holes in my saddle leather."

Red turned on him. "Get goin'!" he roared.

Red went in the house and got his 30-30 carbine off the deer horn rack. In Red's great hands the short-barreled carbine was like a toy. But Red had supreme confidence in its well-oiled efficiency and no less pride in his ability as a hunter. This chance to pit himself against the wily Lobo was a challenge that appealed to him. In his mind there was no doubt as to its outcome. Old Lobo was as good as dead.

By the time Jumpy had their horses saddled, Red's spirits had risen above the stifling heat of the day. When action was in prospect Red always felt better.

"Just lead me to where that last calf was killed," he told Jumpy. "If that was this mornin', it's not likely he'll be far away."

Jumpy mounted reluctantly. Red turned on him in sudden irritation. "What's eatin' on you, anyway?" he asked. "I never knew you to work up a saddle sore before."

Jumpy didn't look at Red. His brow was pulled down in a frown. He took careful aim at a fly sitting on a sagebush ten

feet away and let go with a wad of cut plug. He missed, a sure sign that he was perturbed.

"That calf was in that dry canyon south of Dead Man's Butte," he said.

"So what?" Red asked. He swung his horse around. He knew now that Jumpy had something more on his mind than blisters.

Jumpy said, "That canyon is on Colonel Cultus' side of the range."

"Cultus!" Red exploded. "You inferrin' I'm scared of that old muzzle-loader?"

"No, boss," Jumpy said.

"Anyhow," Red growled, "that's a long way from the Cup and Saucer ranch house. We'll have old Lobo's scalp tied to our saddle before Cultus knows we're in the country."

Jumpy nodded. "That's just it. The Colonel and his foreman, Lem Sturges, is out there with their dogs now. Tex saw 'em."

Red frowned, then his jaw stuck out in stubborn determination. "Forget 'em!" he said. Then he snorted. "Dogs! What's he think he's huntin', rabbits?"

Jumpy shook his head. "He's got some good trackers. That old Hannibal hound is half wolf himself and those 'coon dogs ain't no slouches."

"Dogs!" Red said. "Anytime I can't out track a 'coon hound I'll rent out my saddle and herd sheep. You comin' or stayin'?"

Jumpy shrugged. "It's your party, boss. You cut the cake; I'll help you eat it."

THREE hours later they were looking down into the jagged spaces of Spook canyon. The canyon was perhaps five hundred feet deep, a tangle of boulders and brush and choked up side draws. In spring there was water in its sandy bottom, but now it was dry, hot and airless.

"Old Lobo sure picked a sweet spot to hole up in," Jumpy said. "Providin' he's still here. Couldn't hardly find a cow down there, let alone a wolf."

"We'll find him," Red said confidently. "Where was that calf?"

Jumpy indicated a spot near the bottom of the canyon. "Tex said right by that sand patch," he said. "The old cow had left it there while she went down to the river for water."

Red nodded. "That means he's holed up in the canyon not far from here," he said. "You get down there and start combin' the rocks. I'll keep you covered and when you jump him, I'll let him have it."

Jumpy gave his boss a sour look. "You sure have got things figured out," he said. "Don't wear out your pants sittin' on rocks." His eyes squinted over the canyon. "Reckon you better stand on that point. You can see the whole shebang from there."

Red agreed. While Jumpy dismounted and made his way into the tangle afoot, Red pushed his horse over the rim and rode toward the point Jumpy had indicated. This was an abutment which thrust up out of the canyon a couple of hundred feet below the rim.

It was rough, slippery going. Red could feel his horse test the footing beneath him, could feel his rump heave and his forefeet dig into the precipitous grass slope. It was steeper than Red had thought, and for a few minutes he had his mind strictly on the business at hand.

Thus when he struggled up out of a tangle of rocks and brush to a small ridge and found another rider waiting for him, a Sharp's 45-70 trained on his belt buckle, Red felt considerable shock.

He jerked back on the reins. His hand slapped down to the 30-30 in his saddle scabbard.

"Colonel Cultus!" he exploded.

"You're trespassin' on my property, suh," Cultus said. The rifle relaxed only slightly. The Colonel was about sixty, straight in the saddle. His face was slender but strong and proud, and he sported a carefully brushed goatee. Although he and Red were neighbors, their strong, stubborn dispositions had kept them in a state of armed truce for years.

"Trespassin!" Red said. "Why you old goat, this is open range. I'm wolf huntin'."

The Colonel regarded Red's 30-30 coldly. "May I ask, suh, what with?"

His disparaging tone made Red even madder than the Sharps. He figured the Colonel had no present intention of shooting him but was just intent on making him crawl a little. The slighting reference to his 30-30 didn't help, either. Red's beefy face crimsoned.

"What with?" he roared. "I'm huntin' with my two feet and this thirty-thirty. I don't need dogs, and I can hit anything I can see with this carbine. What are you goin' to do with that cannon—bat him over the head?"

It was the Colonel's turn to stiffen. "I'll have you know, suh, this heah's the best gun ever made. Furthermore, I was the best shot in Jeb Stuart's command." His eyes swept the canyon side. "See that boulder, yondah?" He indicated a rock about the size of his hat a couple of hundred yards distant. His Sharps came up and roared. The rock bucked and tumbled down the canyon side.

It was good shooting. Red was impressed, but he wasn't going to admit it. He spat in contempt.

"Like shootin' at a barn when you're inside," he said. "There's a prairie chicken just beyond. See his tail feather stickin' over that rise? Watch me cut it off right at the seat of his pants."

HE PULLED his rifle from his scabbard, raised it, nestled it into his shoulder and fired, all in one swift motion. The feather disappeared. Red glared at the Colonel triumphantly.

The Colonel said, "Missed, no doubt."

"Missed? By thunder, I never miss!" Red sputtered indignantly. "I'll get that feather and show you!" He spurred his horse along the side of the canyon. When he reached the rise where he'd seen the feather and looked down into the swale beyond, his mouth dropped open.

Lying flat on the sand and clutching at it like he was trying to pull it over him, lay a trembling Indian buck. Sticking out of his braid was the feather Red had seen. The feather was intact.

Red gaped. "Joe Jumping Bean!" he gasped. "What in the name of Moses you doin' here?"

Joe Jumping Bean glanced up fearfully. Then the slack expression on Red's face seemed to reassure him. He stopped trembling and sat up.

"Me hunt wolf," he said. "Look like got wrong end of gun, by jimminy." Joe Jumping Bean had received some education at the Indian School; and had helped Red once or twice at odd jobs when he needed tobacco money.

Red recovered somewhat. It had scared him for a moment to think how close he had come to killing Joe. Joe started to get up and that reminded Red of Colonel Cultus. He jumped from his horse and shoved Joe back down to the ground.

"Listen," he asked the puzzled Indian. "How far did I miss you?"

Joe shrugged. "'Bout ten, forty feet," he said. "Too close enough, by jimminy."

Red growled. Joe's idea of feet were vague, he knew.

"I never missed you more than six inches," he said.

"Hit juniper," Joe said. He indicated a fresh scar on the ragged tree a few feet beyond. It was a good ten feet up on the trunk. The evidence was indisputable.

Red's mind whirled. "You bust that feather in two," he said. "You tell Colonel Cultus I shot it off your top."

Joe shook his head. "No can do," he said. "Eagle feather. Me brave of tribe."

Red said, "You blasted redskin, you bust that feather or I'll pull your scalp lock out by the roots!"

Joe Jumping Bean drew himself up as proudly as his sitting position would allow. He stared at Red indignantly. "Great White Father no like," he said.

Red cursed. He knew Joe was right. If he so much as laid a finger on the buck, the Indian police would be on his neck for blood.

"Listen," Red said. "Bust that feather and I'll give you a cow."

For a moment a slight gleam showed in Joe's black eyes. Then they were swiftly stony. "Five cows," he said.

"Five cows!" Red roared. "That's barefaced robbery! I wouldn't give you . . ."

He sought to gain control of himself, "Two," he said.

Joe shook his head. "Five."

Red's face purpled. Then he heard the sound of horses approaching along the canyon side. Joe's face was completely impersonal. Red let his wind out in a great exasperated sigh. "Okay," he said. "Five cows." Joe broke the feather and replaced the stub end in his scalp lock.

"You're lucky, suh," Colonel Cultus said when he had viewed the evidence. He looked at Joe sharply. "You sure he broke it?"

Joe's face remained immobile and silent.

"I scared him dumb," Red said.

AT THAT moment a great yapping broke loose down the canyon. The Colonel's head came up like an old soldier's at the sound of the bugle. "The dogs have got the scent!" he said. He wheeled away. Then he halted and turned the Red. "I'll give you till sundown," he said. "Then I'd appreciate you returnin' to your own range, suh."

Red said, "Bah!"

The Colonel rode around a point out of sight. Joe picked up his old muzzle loading flint-lock out of the sand and faded into the scenery. Red heard a scrambling in the rocks below and Jumpy appeared.

When Red told him what had happened, Jumpy nodded. "That Joe Jumping Bean will be Chief some day," he said. "Can't figure how you missed."

Red shook his head and examined his rifle. Then he growled. "My hind sight's slid up on the ramp," he said. "Must have caught it on the brush."

Jumpy clucked sympathetically. "Maybe you're lucky, though. Cattle are cheap."

The dogs were raising a hullabaloo in the canyon bottom.

"Lem Sturges is down there with the dogs," Jumpy said. "So far they've jumped three jackrabbits and a mossy-horned bull."

"Let 'em go," Red said. "Maybe they'll start old Lobo movin'. We'll separate and get on stand. Let the Colonel do our huntin' for us." The idea of picking off old Lobo about two jumps ahead of Cultus' dogs made Red grin.

Jumpy shrugged. "Good a way as any," he said. "Only don't start spendin' that reward money yet. That canyon is a jungle."

"We'll get him," Red said confidently, and added grimly, "We got to."

Jumpy turned to the north and was soon lost in the tangle of brush and rocks. Red found a shady place for his horse and began to look for a likely spot to stand.

His determination to get old Lobo had been doubled by his encounter with Colonel Cultus. To let the Colonel beat him on this wolf hunt would be too much for his pride to swallow.

It was stifling hot in the canyon. There was not a trace of breeze. The sun had traveled to the west and taken all the shade out of this, the eastern slope. The brush was thick and dry. It was almost impossible to move without being heard.

Red began to realize that getting Lobo was going to take a lot of hunting. There were a thousand hiding places.

Red looked over the lay of the land and decided to stand on the point Jumpy had pointed out originally. This commanded a sweep of the canyon and was just above the point where the last calf had been killed. Although old Lobo might be ten miles away by now, Red felt there was a good chance that he was holed up nearby against the heat of the day.

The brush and rocks were thicker here than at any point along the canyon's length. The calf had been killed early that morning. Tex had found it while making a casual tally of Red's cattle. While Red and the Colonel were at dagger points, Red knew that his men had a working agreement with those of the Cup and Saucer.

To reach the point it was necessary to cross a small, brush choked draw and Red plunged into this with considerably more energy than caution. The brush ripped at his clothes, tore his shirt and scratched his face. The nearer he got to the bottom

of the draw, the thicker the brush became until Red was fighting for every inch of progress.

Red cursed the brush, cursed the heat. He pressed the tangle down with his rifle barrel and clambered over the top. The brush whipped up and caught him in the face.

To add to his worries he heard Cultus' hounds yipping below him. There was a new note in their voices. They were excited and urgent. Red stopped and listened.

"Got somethin' hot," he muttered. "Comin' this way."

DESPERATELY he fought onward. This was no place to be caught if old Lobo was coming at him. He couldn't see ten feet in front of him for a shot.

He battled his way grimly to the bottom. The north side was as bad as the south. Red got down on his knees and crawled. Sometimes he had to get flat on the ground. The sweat streamed down into his eyes. He gasped for breath. The dogs were not more than a hundred yards below him now.

At last the brush thinned. Red struggled to his feet and broke into the open. He was just in time to see a gray shape loping along the canyon side. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder, but before he could get a bead the animal was gone. Red cursed, feeling sure he had seen the calf killing wolf, and ran for the point of rocks.

Two or three times he caught sight of the slinking shape below him; but each time it was gone before he had a chance to shoot. There was no one else in sight.

No use trying to be cautious now. He had made more noise than a calf in a coal chute. He ran for the point.

When he reached it, panting like a wind broken cayuse, he found that it was more of a ledge than a point, extending for a hundred yards along the canyon side. It broke almost perpendicularly into the canyon. About half way down, there was another smaller ledge running along the face and below this step a straight up-and-down drop for another thirty feet.

On this lower ledge he caught a brief glimpse of the running wolf. He threw up his 30-30 in a snap shot. At that instant the ground beneath him gave way. There was one frantic moment when he grabbed blindly for the lip of the precipice, then he was plunging downward.

Desperately he clawed at the rocks and sand beneath him. Nothing held. A scraggly bush shot by him as he grabbed at it, ripping his hand. He hit the ledge below with a thud that knocked all the wind out of him. For one sickening moment he teetered on the edge while his eyes gazed horrified and helpless at the jagged rocks below. Then he rolled back against the cliff.

The lay there, bruised, beaten and exhausted, pulling in his breath in great gasps. His rifle was gone, lost somewhere in the slide. Slowly he got to his hands and knees—and gazed straight into the yellow eyes of the animal he'd been chasing.

"Old Lobo!" he gasped. The wolf lay crouched and snarling several feet away. Just beyond him the ledge terminated abruptly. He was trapped between Red and the drop off.

Red's heart went way down in his shoes. He was empty handed. Old Lobo, gaunt flanked and slavering at the mouth, was crouched ready to spring. Red knew he must be terrified and desperate enough to do anything.

Red glanced frantically behind him. By backing carefully maybe he could get away. There was no going up or down. Cautiously he put one foot behind him.

"A hell of a wolf hunt!" he muttered.

Something like anger began to burn in him. He was bruised, beaten, every bone in his body ached. Joe Jumping Bean had made a sucker out of him. The Colonel had ordered him off the range. It was too much for Red.

"No blasted wolf is going to beat me!" he growled. His jaw thrust out and the cords in his neck began to swell. He picked up a rock as big as his fist and threw it. The snarling animal crept farther

back on his haunches. He gathered his legs under him.

Red searched desperately for another rock. They were all either too big or too small. Then one of Cultus' hound dogs cut loose down below. Old Lobo's ears twitched and for an instant his eyes left Red to glance nervously in the direction of the dog.

Red sensed instantly that old Lobo was afraid of the dogs. Red was on his hands and knees now, cursing and tugging at a rock imbedded in the earth. The dog stopped baying and old Lobo settled again on his haunches. The rock refused to come loose. Red started yapping in imitation of Cultus' hound dog.

OLD LOBO looked startled. His nostrils flared and his lips drew back, revealing his fangs. Red continued his howling. The rock came loose in his fingers. Without rising to his feet, he drew back his arm to throw.

Just then a small chunk of the ledge between Red and the wolf disappeared in a cloud of dust and the explosion of Cultus' 45-70 echoed in the canyon.

It was too much for old Lobo. He whirled and went sailing out into space. He landed in a clump of brush that broke his fall and just kept on going. Red roared and threw the rock. He missed by a country mile.

Peering over the edge, Red could see the Colonel breaking out of the brush down below. The Colonel was afoot now. Red shook his fist at the Colonel. He was mad clear through.

He ached and smarted in every part of his body from his fall. He was morally certain that Cultus' shot had cheated him of Lobo's scalp and a thousand dollars cash.

He went running back along the ledge and was met at its end by the Colonel.

"You whiskered up old bean pole!" Red shouted. "What do you mean by shootin' at my wolf?"

"Your wolf, suh?" The Colonel's manner was unruffled, though he was breathing hard from his climb. "My dog had him cornered. I heard him distinctly." Red started forward, saw the Colonel's rifle lift and stopped helplessly, his hands clenching.

"Dog, nothin'!" he yelled. "That was —" He stopped, suddenly remembering himself on his hands and knees baying like a coon dog. He must have been farther back on the ledge where the Colonel hadn't seen him.

"That was what, suh?" Cultus asked.

Red stuttered. His mouth opened and closed. "None of your business!" he roared.

Just then one of the dogs picked up Lobo's scent again. Cultus' head turned. His eyes shifted back to Red once, going over him swiftly. "You look like you were sent for and couldn't come," he said. "I'll swear I heard a dog up here." Then he was gone along the canyon side, his long legs eating up the distance toward the dogs. Red glowered after him.

"Boss, what happened?" Jumpy came clambering up the slope. He had Red's 30-30 in his hand. "I was scramblin' along down there and all at once it started rainin' rocks and guns." he said. "Your rifle lit in some brush. I don't think it's hurt none." His eyes widened as he took in Red's battered condition. "What hit you? You look like you were sent for and couldn't come," he said. "I thought I heard a dog up here."

"Shut up!" Red's voice was almost as loud as Cultus' 45-70.

Jumpy silenced abruptly and his face became perfectly blank, though there remained a slightly curious look in his eyes. Red snatched the 30-30 from him. His mind was seething, but it was working, too. He listened to the sound of the dogs, sized up the lay of the country, and tried to put himself in Lobo's place.

"Jumpy," he asked. "What would you do if you was Lobo?"

Jumpy got the idea. His eyes went over the canyon wall.

"Looks like the dogs are below him," he said. "That means he'll go straight ahead or up. He ain't likely to go ahead far because there's a big open space just

beyond him. He'll stick to the brush. And it's a cinch he ain't goin' up to let himself be caught out in the desert. That means—" His eyes met Red's.

Red nodded. "You got it," he said. "He'll circle back above us, figuring to hit the head of that brush draw I came through and go straight to the bottom." His eyes surveyed the ground above them quickly a scheming light in his eyes. Let the Colonel run the wolf over them. Red licked his lips in anticipation.

"Get behind those rocks up there," he pointed. "We got a clear shot to the rim. When he pokes his nose into the open, we'll let him have it."

Quickly they scrambled upward to the rocks Red had indicated. The brush thinned near the top of the ridge, forming a narrow open space that ran clear to the rim. Red had a clean shot up this opening. Jumpy moved over to the left, in the hope that if Red missed, he could get a shot in the canyon, a forlorn hope Red thought. Once the wolf was over the ridge into the canyon, he was gone for good.

FOR a few minutes, Red lay silently, listening to Cultus' 'coon hounds. Presently the baying grew nearer. Red and Jumpy exchanged significant glances.

"He's turned," Red said, in a low voice. "He's comin' back."

Jumpy nodded. His gray eyes were squinting up the slope.

Then the brush started wiggling on Red's right. Red swung his rifle barrel around to cover the spot. For a moment he thought Lobo was nearer than he figured, then he saw that it was Joe Jumping Bean gliding out into the open. He lowered his rifle with a soft curse.

"Dang you, Joe, you find your own spot," he growled.

But Joe only gave Red a baleful glance and moved to a stand twenty yards ahead of Red up the slope. Red felt himself getting mad.

"Low-down Injun," he said, controlling himself with effort. He knew if he made too much noise, old Lobo might hear him and turn. He settled back behind his rock growling to himself. Up ahead, Joe folded to the earth and, except for the baying of the dogs, silence settled over the canyon.

Red saw Lobo first. It was just a blurred glimpse of his gray coat about two hundred yards away. Lobo was running to cross the ridge as Red had figured he would. After the first glimpse all he could see was the brush and grass wiggle as Lobo slipped through.

Red stiffened to attention and noted with a frustrated feeling that Joe had seen Lobo, too. Joe had risen to one knee, his finger had slipped into the trigger guard of his blunderbuss, and his back had stiffened into readiness for the shot.

"He couldn't hit a water barrel with a fryin' pan," Red muttered. "But he's probably got five, six pounds of buckshot rammed into that cannon." He tried vainly to get enough of Lobo into his sights for a shot. But the wolf was hugging the brush. Red knew it was only when he broke into the open at the top for a brief second that they would be able to shoot.

Red was so intent on Lobo and Joe Jumping Bean that he failed to hear Colonel Cultus come up behind him until the Colonel's voice cut into his consciousness.

"I reckon, suh, you've changed you're mind about dogs," the Colonel's voice said acidly. Red started to turn in surprise, then the Colonel's long legs went past him into the open.

Red cursed. "What is this?" he demanded. "An Old Settler's Picnic?" His mind was jumping at this turn of events. Now he had both Joe and the Colonel cutting in on the wolf. Likely they'd all shoot at the same time. He'd have a mighty hard time proving that he alone had shot Lobo. Especially if Lobo had two or three holes in him. And Red needed that thousand dollars, needed it bad! All of it!

Then he decided, with a ray of hope, that the Colonel hadn't yet spotted Lobo. His head was following the direction of Joe Jumping Bean's pointing nose, but it kept moving back and forth slightly like he wasn't quite sure just where Lobo was.

He was about ten feet in front of Red, his legs spraddled, his rifle at ready.

"You long-legged, old donkey," Red hissed at him. "You need specs to read a sign board." He hoped to distract the Colonel's attention. He waited hopefully, but it didn't work. The Colonel didn't relax his survey of the slope.

Red tried again. "You're gettin' too old and feeble to be trusted with a gun," he said. "You pack that chunk of iron a couple of more days and your legs will be bent like a saplin' under a heavy snow." The old cavalryman's neck was beginning to color and Red could see the tenseness coming into his back. But he didn't turn or relax his search for Lobo.

Red was desperate. He was getting at Cultus, but not fast enough. He knew that in a few more seconds Lobo would burst into the open. He knew the Colonel knew it, and Joe sure enough was onto the wolf. Red drew a deep breath.

"Jeb Stuart was a fancy-pants, rockin' chair soldier," he said. "Why did they ever let him run around loose?"

THE Colonel whirled like he'd been brought up on the end of a lass rope. His proud old Southern face was twisted in sudden anger.

"You low-down, good-for-nothing scalawag!" he yelled, his composure suddenly gone. "No Yankee can talk like that about Jeb Stuart. He was—" The Colonel's anger seemed to choke him. He started for Red shaking his fists. Red watched him out of the corner of his eye. The brush had moved not more than ten feet from the opening.

Red backed away from Cultus and to one side. Joe Jumping Bean was raising his gun. Red waited a second, and then he yelled:

"Grab your scalp lock, Joe! I'm goin' to shoot!"

Joe wasn't anywhere near Red's line of fire, but he crumpled like he'd been shot. He dived for the earth, casting a terrified glance behind him. The glance was enough to show him he'd been tricked, and he tried to get back to his feet —too late.

Red side-stepped Colonel Cultus, raised his gun just as Lobo broke into the clear. It was a snap shot, almost a hundred fifty yards uphill.

But Red made it pay off. Old Lobo rolled end over end, then lay still. He would kill no more calves.

Colonel Cultus skidded to a stop. Too late, he realized that he had been outmaneuvered. His mouth slacked open and his face turned red as a sunset.

Red grinned. "Reckon I owe you an apology, Colonel," he said. "You're good for forty years yet, if you watch your temper. And I reckon Jeb Stuart was a fine soldier and a smart cavalryman, too."

Jumpy came up to join them as Joe Jumping Bean sorrowfully picked up his unfired muzzle-loader and trudged up to the ridge to inspect the dead wolf. Red and Jumpy and the Colonel joined him as the dogs, followed by Lem Sturges, came out of the brush.

"It's Old Lobo all right," Red said with satisfaction. "Two toes missin' off the left front foot. Let's get him on a horse, Jumpy. We got to get to town and buy the boys some tobacco. Besides," he added, glancing at the fuming, but helpless, Cultus. "We got to be off the Colonel's range by dark."

COMING NEXT ISSUE

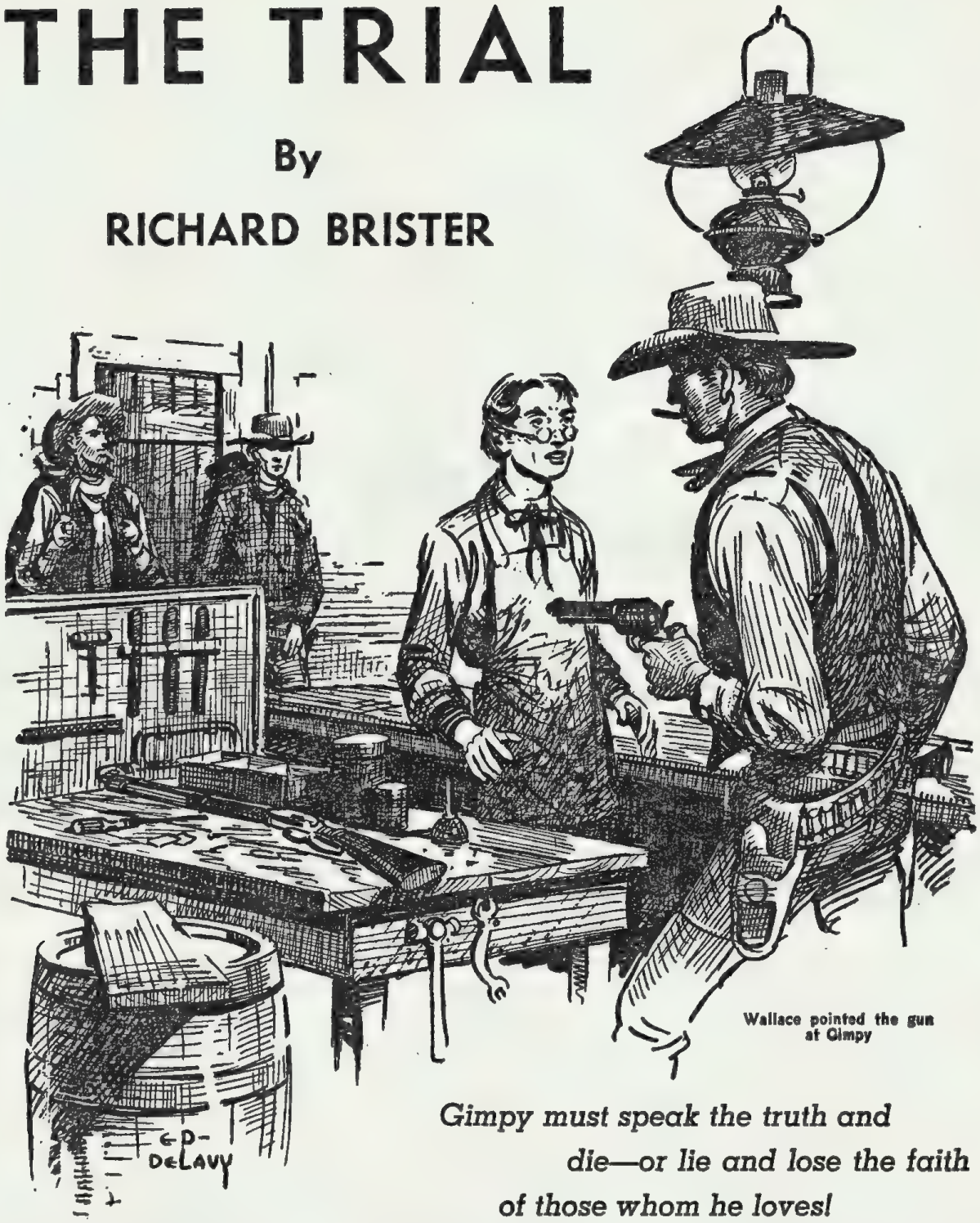
RUN, COYOTE, RUN

A Rip-Snorting Story of Cactus City

By L. P. HOLMES

THE TRIAL

By RICHARD BRISTER



Wallace pointed the gun at Gimpy

Gimpy must speak the truth and die—or lie and lose the faith of those whom he loves!

ON THAT fifth day of Cal Burk's trial for murder, the tiny desert town of Painted Rock received yet another influx of visitors. People were saying this day would see a climax to the business, would see the verdict turned in against the accused, would mark the arrival of a crude sort of justice to this frontier country. It was a thing for which the inhabitants of the town and its out-

lying ranches had long and painfully waited.

They flocked in, whole families of them, on horseback, in buckboards and fine carriages, in carts and by the overworked stage—anything that had legs or wheels and could be pressed into service.

A holiday spirit pervaded the bleached-out little town, for this was Friday, ordinarily a working day. But a strong undercurrent of tension was there, only partly camouflaged by the high spirits of the townspeople. Cal Burk had been one of Sil Wallace's men.

"Mark my words," said a rancher in Gimpy Whitlock's gunsmith shop across from the hotel. "Burk ain't going to stretch rope if Sil Wallace can help it."

"He'll hang," said the spindly, flap-eared little gunsmith. "Prosecutor's wrapped it up airtight against him. Why, man, when Whitey Keenan takes the stand, it'll all be over except pronouncing sentence on Burk."

"Could be—could be," said the rancher, with a slightly patronizing glance at the gimpy-legged little gunsmith who wore spectacles to compensate for an astigmatism. "What I'd like to know, Gimpy, is how come Keenan ain't been called to the stand yet. Seems to me, him being the prosecution's prize witness, they'd of used him afore this. Could of shortened the trial considerable, and saved taxpayers' money."

"Prosecutor's savin' him for a clincher to his case," said Gimpy Whitlock. "And he'll hang Burk. I'd give you odds on it."

"Mebbe," said the rancher around a frayed toothpick. He looked curiously at the gunsmith. "Understand you'll be takin' the stand your ownself, 'safternoon, Gimpy."

"That's right." Gimpy straightened up self-importantly behind his counter. Folks pretty much ignored him in this town, but today he was tasting a momentary prestige. He would not have been human if he hadn't enjoyed it.

"Gonna tell the jury it was Burk's gun, that the blame fool dropped in the alley when they routed him out of there after he done in the pilgrim, hey, Gimpy?"

"I reckon," said Gimpy.

The rancher smiled thinly at him. "Sil Wallace ain't goin' to favor you none, Gimpy, for helping to put a noose on his man."

IT WAS a thought which had occurred to Gimpy Whitlock. In fact, he had not slept too well last night, for thinking about it. But he had told himself, again and again, that Whitey Keenan's evidence was the real clincher in the State's case against Burk. What *he* had to offer, in identifying the gun as belonging to Burk, would be merely corroboration of a fact established. So why, he asked himself, should Sil Wallace hate him?

"I ain't concerned about that part of it," he said, sticking his undersized chest out a little. "Reckon I'll do my duty as a citizen of this town, when my time comes."

"Surprise me some," said the rancher, looking at him curiously. "Never figured you had that much sand in you, Gimpy, and that's a fact."

He walked out then, leaving Gimpy to frown over the words. Folks figured because a man was sawed-off and kind of spindly and ineffectual to look at, that he wasn't worth much attention. Well, he'd show 'em, when he took that witness stand this afternoon, and told how he had worked on that gun of Burk's the week before the trial, and could positively identify the murder gun as belonging to Sil Wallace's no-account hired hoodlum.

He was fitting a new sear pin into Sheriff Kingsley's spare saddle gun, an hour later, when a current of excitement washed its way down the wide, sun-baked street. People were talking animatedly on all the corners and he went out and crossed to the stoop of the hotel to find out what was behind all the excitement.

"Well, Gimpy," said the same rancher who'd been in the shop earlier, "looks like you're for it now. Yes, sir, looks like you're surely for it."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Keenan's flew the coop."

The shock of it almost knocked the gun-

smith off his spindly legs. "Keenan's run out? But—but he don't dast to! He's the State's man. He'll go to jail for that, if he don't show up to testify, down to the trial."

"He ain't showed," said the rancher, grinning thoughtfully at Gimpy. "Sheriff and his deputies been scouring town for him, the past hour. Can't raise hide nor hair of him. Mebbe he thought things over, and decided he didn't care to turn evidence against Sil's man. Might of figured 't wouldn't be healthy . . . What's wrong with you, Gimpy?"

He was aware of the rancher's taunting slow smile, of the covert grins of the others.

"Nothing," he said shortly.

" 'Pear kind of peaked. Ain't scared, are you?"

"I ain't s-scared."

"Glad to hear it," said the rancher. "Because it sure looks like you're elected to wrap that rope around Burk's neck, with Whitey out of the picture."

Gimpy went back across the wide street, limping a little on his slightly crooked left leg. He wanted to wrap himself in the comforting solitude of his shop, among his familiar tools and guns and furnishings; he had to consider this change in his situation carefully, and from all angles.

He went in hurriedly, blinking to adjust his eyes after the bright outer sunlight. It was seconds before he saw the big, blocky body of Sil Wallace, standing there against the high counter, puffing blandly on a thick cigar. And then he saw Rapport and Sweeney, the saloonman's two hard-visaged gunmen, standing behind and flanking the big man.

Despite his efforts at self-control, his thin, small body went tense as a board, and he gulped drily.

"Hello, Whitlock." Sil Wallace smiled pleasantly at him. "Nice of you to leave shop untended for a moment. Give me and the boys here a chance to slip in the back way, unnoticed. Bolt that door."

"B-bolt the door?"

"Me and the boys desires to talk with you, Whitlock. Private. I said bolt the door."

"All right, Mr. Wallace."

He slid the bolt into place and turned, leaning against it, waiting for the big man's next move.

"I see," Sil Wallace noted conversationally, "you've heard the news about Keenan."

"Just that he's disappeared."

"Smart feller, that Keenan. How you going to testify this afternoon, Whitlock?"

"Why, I—"

" 'Course, the prosecutor may ask for a stay, hoping for Keenan to come back. Which ain't likely."

GIMPY WHITLOCK looked at the big, bluff saloonman, at the cold, black eyes in the expressionless face.

"W-why ain't it likely, Mr. Wallace?"

"Because I said it ain't. You got to understand that what I say generally carries a lot of weight back of it in this town, Whitlock. Now, like I was saying, prosecutor may ask for a stay. On the other hand, they's a thousand or two folks come in town special to see the wind-up of this trial. They ain't going to put up with no delay, and I figure the judge is going to toady to them on that little matter. I figure they'll carry right on, hoping for your evidence about that murder gun, to throw the jury dead against poor Cal Burk. As fine a man, Burk, as was ever falsely accused of cold-hearted murder. You ain't saying nothing, Whitlock. Cat got your tongue?"

"What is there to say?"

"Well, now, that's just it. You got to decide about that, before you get up there on that witness stand in a couple, few hours. How's your family, Whitlock? That purty little wife of yours and them three nice young boys?"

"They're all right."

"Why, now, I'm glad to hear it. Yes, sir, I'm right glad to hear it. And you? How're you feeling?"

"A-all right."

"Come over here, man. Don't be so stand-offish towards me. Don't like that, in a man. Makes me feel like I ain't popu-

lar, when folks stands off so far from me."

The gunsmith limped across the room toward the big saloonman. Sil Wallace took a gun out of a fancy holster, and pointed it at Gimpy Whitlock's suddenly trembling stomach. He rammed the muzzle of the gun right up against Gimpy's belt buckle.

"This gun ain't working right for me," said Sil Wallace. "Goes off kind of sudden and unexpected-like. Like to kill somebody, it is, if something ain't done about it."

"I—I could look it over for y-you, Mr. W-Wallace."

"Ain't necessary, Whitlock." He took the gun back from the gunsmith's buckle and reholstered. "Well, it's been nice talking to you. Ain't it been nice talking to the gunsmith, boys?" He arched a bantering grin at the two gunmen behind him. They grinned wolfishly at their boss, then at Whitlock. "See you at the trial, Whitlock," said Sil Wallace, and moved casually toward the back door through which he and his gunnies had entered. "Nice place you got here. Yes, sir, you got a mighty nice place here."

For five full minutes after the three had left, Gimpy Whitlock stood against his counter, trembling and mulling over what had been said. Whitey Keenan just might turn up, but according to Sil Wallace, that wasn't likely. Something in Gimpy Whitlock's blood curdled, as he recalled the saloonman's inflection when he'd made that statement about the State's number one witness against Burk.

Somebody banged at the front door and rattled the lock. He went over and opened up to Sheriff Matt Kingsley.

The lawman was tall, stooped-shouldered, with dangling ram's-horn mustaches, and keen brown eyes.

"Since when you locking your door against visitors, Gimpy?"

"What do you want, Matt?"

"Just come by to see how your nerve's holding up, Gimpy. There's a lotta folks come to town to see the Wallace combine broke in this trial. There's a chance to swing the tide against Sil Wallace today. Keenan turnin' up missing has hurt us, but we still got enough to hang Sil's man. You're the key to it, Gimpy. Reckon you know that."

"I know," he said troubledly.

"You ain't going to waver away from your duty?"

"I—I don't know." He couldn't look at the lawman. He groaned, and said, "A thing like this takes some thinking."

"It don't take thinking," said the sheriff, suddenly hot in anger at him. "Takes manhood, Gimpy. Plain and simple manhood. We're all solid behind you. What's wrong? Sil been in here with them two gun-happy hoodlums, Sweeney and Rapport, trying to throw a scare in you?"

Gimpy Whitlock bit on his lip and said nothing.

The sheriff stood looking at him for a long moment, then gave a snort of disgust, and walked out.

Gimpy Whitlock looked at his fat silver watch, and realized it was time to go home for his lunch and then mosey over to town hall and the trial. He closed up and walked down the board walk toward his white frame house on the south side of town, very conscious of the eyes upon him. He was a big man in Painted Rock this day, a key man in Burk's murder trial. Suddenly he wished to the bottom of his heart that he had no part to play in this showdown battle between Sil Wallace and the forces of law and order.

HE ATE without gusto at the lunch table. Mae and the three boys, Charley, Johnnie and Edward, kept glancing covertly at him.

"I heard about Keenan, that coward," Mae said, spooning up potato salad for the boys. "It's too bad. Wallace either paid him plenty to run, or scared him plenty, they're saying. But people are really angry now. They'll find against Burk, with your evidence to tip the scales against him."

"I think they would," he admitted.

"Would?" she said, and lifted an eyebrow at him. "You—you're not wavering on this, I hope."

"It's a thing that takes a lot of thought, Mae," he said fumblingly, and looked downward as the boys' startled eyes impaled his shrivelling ego. A man likes to be a hero to his wife and especially to his boys and he was cruelly aware that his vacillation now was destroying the illusion for them. "I'll do what I think is right," he said thickly, and got up in a deathly silence and went upstairs to change his clothes for the trial.

He struggled with his problem as he groomed himself, and he was still fighting to find the right answer as he came into the town hall, past the gauntlet of the townspeople.

Peabody, the hardwareman, said concernedly, "Don't let us down in there, Gimpy. This is our chance to break Sil Wallace's back."

"Um . . . I suppose so," Gimpy said in his uncertain way, and shouldered on through the crowd before they could put him in a hot box. They were all counting on him, Gimpy Whitlock, to say the words under oath that would break Sil Wallace, but did they count the risk they were asking him to run for them? Sil Wallace was an iron man in this territory, a rock that did not break at the first tap of the hammer.

A man with a wife and three fine boys has his responsibilities to think of, and Gimpy Whitlock sat in a daze, not hearing the droning voice of the judge and the lawyers, as the trial got under way again after the recess for lunch.

His call came, and he cast an uncertain glance around the packed room, picking out Sil Wallace, flanked by Sweeney and Rapport, the professional killers. And Mae and the boys, come to see him in his big moment. Mae smiled encouragement to him, and the boys nodded, but he saw only the frozen-eyed faces of Sil Wallace's killers as he went up to the chair and was sworn in, his trembling hand on the fat Bible.

Well, a man had his duty, and he looked around him at the tense faces of his neighbors and told himself that the truth and nothing but the truth was what the court would get from Gimpy Whitlock, gunsmith.

The judge was just giving the prosecutor the nod to take the witness when the back doors were flung inward and Matt Kingsley barged into the hall, perspiring, his ram's-horn mustaches quivering with rage.

"Hold it, Judge!" he boomed. "I got news for the court. The boys have found Whitey Keenan."

"Well," said the judge, displaying judicial annoyance at the rudeness of Matt's interruption, "bring him in, man! He's a key witness."

"Not any more, he ain't, Your Honor," said the sheriff. "The boys found him laying in the bottom of Dead Man's Gorge, with his back broke."

"*What?*" thundered the judge. "You mean he was—"

"I mean he give every evidence of having been pushed over the cliff," snapped the sheriff, and his hard brown eyes swung full on Sil Wallace and his two gunmen. While the room rumbled and growled in its collective throat, Sil Wallace blandly took out a toothpick and sawed at a bit of food lodged between his incisors. Once, his eyes came up to meet those of Gimpy Whitlock, who sat numbly on the witness stand.

In the back, an outraged rancher bellowed, "Go on with the trial! Finish it up! Trouble with this kind of justice is it moves too dang slow. If we'd used lynch law on Burk, like we should of, Whitey Keenan would be living this minute!"

"Go ahead, prosecutor," somebody else yelled. "Put the big question to the witness! Tie Burk to that gun and I reckon the jury will do its rightful duty!"

The prosecutor looked at the judge. The judge looked at Gimpy Whitlock.

"Are you composed, man? Are you ready to give an honest account of yourself on the witness chair?"

Gimpy Whitlock put a trembling hand to his sweat-sticky collar, and fumbled. "I am, Your Honor."

"All right, prosecutor."

After the usual preparatory questions,

the prosecutor looked directly into Gimpy Whitlock's eyes, and said, "I have here a gun, Mr. Whitlock. Have you seen this gun, in the line of your work, within the past several months?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"And did a man give it to you for repairs, and did you repair it, and give it back to this man several days before the deceased met his untimely death in Porterman's Alley?"

"Yes sir."

The prosecutor pointed dramatically at the defendant, Burk, who sat in the prisoner's dock, glaring at Gimpy.

"Is that the man for whom you repaired this gun, Whitlock?"

NOW it had come, and all the court, townspeople on the long benches, judge up there above him, Mae and the boys in the third row back, Wallace and his icy-eyed gunmen, Burk, the attorneys, all strained toward little Gimpy Whitlock. He was perspiring, for he could read the way it was to be in the tense, clouded eyes of the jurymen in their docket. His answer to this question would swing them inexorably against Burk, would hang Burk, if he, Gimpy Whitlock, tied the man to the murder weapon.

He felt the dryness of his throat, and his wrists were perspiring. He looked at Wallace, wavered, tried to speak, then glanced toward Mae and the boys. Mae nodded at him, ever so slightly, and he thought, *Mae, Mae, if I say it, they'll kill me. Would you deprive yourself of a husband, the boys of a father?*

As he hesitated, struggling to find his way through the emotional jungle, his eye fell on little Eddie, the youngest, and he saw something in the little tyke's eyes that caught at him, that twisted and burned inside him. He saw the boy losing respect for him as he wavered under the fire. And it came to him, hard and definite, that if he showed the white feather now he would be killing himself in his boys' eyes, just as surely as if he put a gun to his head and pulled trigger.

A boy has to be proud of his father in the town he grows up in. To be ashamed of one's father to a proud youngster, is worse than being orphaned.

He said suddenly, huskily, "Yes, that's the man. Cal Burk."

He sat back, limp and exhausted. A cheer came up, and the judge pounded with his gavel. He did not look toward Wallace, as he supplied answers to several more questions, and he steadfastly stuck to his story during the cross-examination.

They finally let him step down. He half heard the summaries, and the jury adjourned, looking angry and full of an inner conviction. They came back in precisely five minutes to report that they found the defendant guilty as charged.

The judge pronounced sentence, and there was a sudden break for the exits, which Gimpy Whitlock reluctantly joined.

Outside, he came full against Sil Wallace and the two gunmen, within a ring formed by townspeople and ranch folk. He was not armed, and Sil Wallace was infuriated.

"I'll break you for this, Whitlock. Hear? I'll break you! You won't last another two weeks in this town. You and that two-bit little gunsmithing shanty. I got a good mind to go down there and bust that place up some for you."

"You're talkin' more," said Sheriff Matt Kingsley, behind Gimpy, "than is healthy for you, Sil. You make a move toward Gimpy's place, you and your pair of hoodlums, and I'll have you in irons."

"Listen to who's suddenly tryin' to act up to his law badge," sneered Sil Wallace. "Stay off my toes, Matt. I can break you, easy enough, in the next election, if I choose to. I can—"

"No," said the lawman with quiet-spoken self-assurance, "no, you can't. You're about through breaking people, Sil. And I'll tell you how come. I know Cal Burk. I ought to; been spendin' a good deal of my time with him up in jail, waitin' on trial. Cal's going to feel mighty mean, hanging for doing your dirty work for you, Sil. He's going to turn on you. He'll talk before he stretches rope for you. And I got a hunch you and them two gun-

slammin' hooligans you've hired are heading right for the same kind of justice that finally caught Cal up."

Sil Wallace appeared to lose stature. Sweeney and Rapport cast worried glances at the ring of townspeople and ranch folk which had them hemmed in now.

"Let's lynch 'em," yelled a drunken cowboy. "Right now. There ain't no doubt they done for Keenan."

The trio paled and their eyes became ratlike and restive, seeking an exit.

The sheriff said, "Nothing doing, boys. The law just come to Painted Rock today, and from now on, we're taking care of our scum legal and proper. We'll get these three dead to rights, all in good time. In the meanwhile, let 'em pass. Go on, clear a way there. Leave 'em run in a hole somewheres and think about it."

As the three skulked nervously away from the crowd, Matt Kingsley put his hand on Gimpy Whitlock's frail shoulder.

"Proud of you, Gimpy," he said. "Done yourself mighty proud in there."

Gimpy Whitlock saw Mae and the boys waiting for him and moved to join them. The pride was in their eyes, too, as he came to them. He knew, suddenly, that two men had been on trial today. One had been found guilty of murder. The other had been found not wanting in courage.

The crowd parted respectfully before the frail little man with the owlish, bespectacled eyes and the gimpy leg, and smiled as his family possessively clustered about him.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

when the travelers westward got that far they were really in dangerous country. There is a little town there now with a population of perhaps 500. It derived its name from the rock, a bold projecting red sandstone cliff, which is one of the most notable landmarks along the Santa Fe Trail and was named Pawnee Rock, it is said, on account of a great battle that was fought there between the Plains Indians and the Pawnees in which the Pawnees were practically annihilated.

Many stories were told of Indian fights around the rock and the vicinity was feared by the travelers as it was here that Indians often lurked in wait in its shadows for wagon trains of pioneers, and yet that great old plainsman, Kit Carson, is said to have camped there, and his name and those of John Sherman, Robert E. Lee, and John Freeman, are carved upon the rock. They are said to have been carved there in person by these great men.

The Cimarron Desert

Perhaps one of the most trying stretches of the Santa Fe Trail was what was called the Cimarron Desert. It was an immense barren plain without wood or water, stretching for fifty miles between the Arkansas and the Cimarron Rivers, and for forty miles of this distance there was not a single landmark and no trail to be followed. Wagon-masters laid their course by compass on that prairie ocean, as level as the calmest sea. It was customary for the caravans to halt just after crossing the Arkansas, and for a full day to let their animals rest, graze and prepare for the dreaded journey across the desert.

The cooks of a caravan would spend the whole day while the stock was grazing, cooking and preparing supplies for the desert journey. They knew that it would be at least two days before they found water or fuel for cooking. The first five miles of the journey was the toughest, as it was through the sandhills and was very heavy pulling, and by the time the animals had reached the level plain beyond, many of them were already tired, hot and thirsty. Usually the passage of the sandhills caused several hours' delay as wagons were almost sure to be overturned there, and sometimes the man trying to keep a wagon on an even keel would be injured.

Pioneers Were Game

Those pioneers, however, were game. They never seemed discouraged enough to turn back but kept plodding onward, westward. The sun and wind, to say nothing of the dread of the desert, made every man thirsty

beyond his wont. They often prayed for rain in their hearts, but when rain came in that desert, which was usually in June, it was accompanied by hail, forcing the men under the wagons to escape the hailstones which pelted the animals to distraction. Terrific electrical storms came up, stabbing the ground with bolts of lightning, sometimes killing an ox. Wild winds of terrific force would upset wagons, and the downpour of rain would be like a cloudburst, and yet due to the nature of the soil, just sand, the great stretch would be a desert in spite of the rain. If the rain came the first day out on the desert it was of course refreshing, but later when the oxen were half mad with thirst, a rainstorm meant disaster.

Then, when the creeks filled, the teams would smell the water miles ahead and take off for it, as hard as they could go, dragging the wagons after them and paying little attention to obstacles in their path. Nothing the teamsters could do would check or swerve them, but if they were going in exactly the right direction it was just luck. They never stopped until they had plunged into the water and the wagons usually had everything in them water-soaked, and were perhaps mired in the sand or mud of the stream.

Indian Range

At such a moment, when all men of the caravan were busy trying to get the wagons out of a creek, it was sometimes their fate to see Indians coming, for this was the favorite range of the worst tribes on the plains. Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches, Cheyennes and Arapahoes ranged here.

Many times, in trying to cross this desert stretch, travelers would lose their way, and after traveling miles and miles in the wrong direction would finally wind up against a ledge of sandhills over which they could not drive. It was then that they would realize that they were lost upon a desert, lost where so many others had met disaster, died of thirst or perished at the hands of savages.

This desert often trapped the veteran travelers as well as the greenhorns. A story is told of one who was said to be a competent explorer of the West, Jedediah Smith, who in 1831, when he was only 33 years old, started to Santa Fe with his own wagons.

There was no trail to follow through the desert and Smith had no guide. For three blistering days the party was lost on the desert. He left the wagons and rode alone to try and find water and a way out of the desert. He came upon buffalo trails and followed them as best he could, believing that they would lead him to water. At last he found the dry sandy bed of a former stream.

He felt sure that it was the Cimarron, but there was no water on the surface of the river bed. He looked up and down the stream for a pool, but there were none. He dismounted, eager to slake his thirst, so that he would have strength to carry the word to his comrades, back there in the burning heat. Anxiously he dug barehanded in the sand, scraping out a basin almost two feet deep. The water began to seep in. Smith watched it, smiling with cracked lips. His comrades were saved now. He watched the basin fill up, then stooped to drink. When he raised his head, he found himself surrounded by Comanches.

The Comanches were mounted. When Smith tried to mount, they frightened his horse, and shot and lanced him. He jerked out his holster pistols and tried to defend himself. He killed two of the Comanches, but was so outnumbered that he was quickly slain, and the story of his death might never have been known had it not been that the Indians told it to some Mexican traders to whom they sold his weapons.

Kit Carson

The quaint and lovable character of early plains days, of whom many thrilling yarns have been told, Kit Carson, played his part in many stories of the Santa Fe Trail. One is a story wherein the great trapper and scout, with five comrades, stood off a band of about two hundred Comanches. It was a thrilling battle, and had it not been for the strategy of the famous Kit, the story would have had a much different ending.

This battle was waged on the edge of the Cimarron Desert. Kit had organized his own band of trappers, known as the Carson Men. There were only six members, Kit, Joe Meek, Bill Mitchell and three Delaware Indians. They were riding mules as they were going into the mountains to trap. The Delawares were excellent shots, were clean, proud and industrious, and were accepted by Kit and his two white companions on an equal basis.

One spring morning the six trappers were riding across the bare prairies, heading south.

Suddenly Bill Mitchell pointed to a round black dot on the hilltop ahead. "Injuns!" he said. The dot moved and from the hill poured about two hundred Comanches, riding like the wind to the attack. The skyline sprouted lances, tossing like grass blades in the sun, then black and white eagle feather crests, horses' heads, naked painted warriors.

The Comanches were mounted on fast horses, there was no chance to outrun them and escape on mules. Upon orders from Carson all his men quickly dismounted and with their hunting knives cut the throats of their mules, and as the mules fell each man lay behind the carcass of his mule, using the dead animal as a shield.

Kit's Great Strategy

These six men had rifles, sure, but they were not repeaters, and it was here that Kit Carson used strategy worthy of any army general. As the mounted Indians came charging on he ordered only the three Delawares to fire the first volley, and just as the warriors were near with their lances and bow and arrows, the three Delawares fired—the chief and two warriors toppling to the ground.

The charge divided, part passing on one side of the men and the other half upon the other side. They raced by and then turned to charge back. This time Kit and his two white companions fired their volley. Three more Indians fell to the ground and the charge split again.

The Comanches tried to ride right up to where they could throw their lances into the men, but the dead mules and the smell of their blood so frightened the Comanches' horses that they practically stampeded and were bucking all over the place, making accurate shooting with their bows and arrows impossible.

After several such charges, in which they failed to get the trappers and in which they always lost three of their warriors, the Comanches retired and regrouped for another attack. Then their medicine man, shaking a big rattle, confident of his power to turn bullets, led them on. Kit dropped him, and the redskins, finding their medicine no good that day, retired to the side of the hill where they sat, smoked and talked things over.

It was scorching hot in the midday sun. The dust, the reek of the rifles, and the flies which swarmed about the dead mules and

[*Turn page*]

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stung fiercely, made the position of the trappers anything but pleasant, but all the time they were digging in and fortifying their position as best they could.

While the council of war wore on into the afternoon, some of the young braves ventured down to ride in circles around the trappers' position, shielding themselves by lying on the opposite side of their horses as they ran the circle, and attempting to shoot arrows from that position. After a number of their horses had been killed by the trappers, these Indians also retired back to the side of the hill.

Night Comes On

Night came on and the trappers, sore, hungry and tired, still waited. They lay low and watched the ragged silhouette on the skyline. At last it melted away. For some time they remained in their fort. Then, thinking that the redskins had gone, they got to their feet, stretched their arms and legs and moved about noiselessly. Then they began to creep away.

They had to leave their traps, their saddles and their well-filled packs. Swinging their blankets over their shoulders and carrying their hatchets, knives and rifles, they stole away through the prairie starlight. After a mile they settled down into a steady dog-trot which they maintained all night, and so reached their mountain camp, leaving behind them some forty dead Indians.

Kit Carson and hundreds of other trail blazers and pioneers did a noble work that our generation and generations to come will profit by, both in prosperity and happiness—the building of the West. It would be fitting that we, as we glide over our paved highways along or across those old trails, remember those brave old pioneers. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WESTERN fiction is well over a hundred years old. In fact the stories sent back from the haunts of the Mountain Men as the living truth were sometimes as far from it as what is published today frankly as fiction, and much of it was less artful.

Whether it was fact or fiction, nonetheless, the public's demand for Western lore has been insatiable. Novels, magazine stories, histories, biographies, fact articles of all kinds have tumbled from the typewriters or pens of "men who have been there" in an increasing flood that still apparently has not filled the need.

Anyway, that is what our readers tell us. For years the plaint of many of our correspondents has been, "great book, but wish it was bigger." Well, our new enlarged format should fill the bill. At least, we hope so—and we want you to write and tell us your opinion.

The next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN will be another gala number, featuring Wayne Morgan and the wily Blue Hawk in THE OUTLAW SHERIFF by Walker A. Tompkins, a novel of Border banditry that tests the famous rider's nerve and ingenuity to the limit.

Riding into Splitrock to bring back desperately needed food to the lair of himself and his Yaqui partner in the Seco Madura foothills, Morgan gets tied up with the sheriff of the county, and is dragooned into donning a star when his stern conscience makes him feel duty bound to avenge the latest depredations of a band of murder-mad raiders.

An outlaw riding the lawman's trail, harassed from both sides, the Masked Rider threads his way through hairbreadth escapes and a gun-war on the grand scale that will keep you well on the thrill side from start to finish.

Gaunted by forty-eight hours without grub, the towering six-footer ties up at the hitch-rail with odors of chili and coffee and barbecued meat wafting out of the restaurant window close by, only to turn and see his name posted up in big letters with a $2000 reward for his capture under it. Before Wayne Morgan can digest this blow, Lane Scofield of the Slash S comes along at a high lope with the news that the camp of Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider has been discovered—and the little town, already tense over the threatened lynching of the bandit, Musto, whom Sheriff Jennings has cooped up and is raving mad in his jail, is fit to explode.

And it does explode, with Wayne Morgan in the middle of the explosion. In fact, he adds his own share of fireworks to the general melee, for as you may have noticed, when this hombre gets mixed in anything he sure gets mixed good and proper and most likely turns around and does the mixing himself—with his enemies as the final ingredients.

And so it turns out in THE OUTLAW SHERIFF, as salty a six-gun sizzler as ever

sowed sand in a sandstorm or caused the tumbleweeds to turn in their tracks and head back into a desert tornado. Look forward to this whirlwind of a novel in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

Another favorite, or rather a trio of favorites who will appear in the same issue are the old sun-soaked sin busters, Shoo-fly Davis, Puggy Jimpson and Tug Stevens, not to mention their hereditary enemy and good friend Cactus County's big, tough Sheriff Bosco Bates.

In this case Bosco acts in a role which could be called either friend or enemy, for he commissions the unholy trio to capture the coyotes that are getting Buck Kyle's Tepee brand calves over on Bucket Crick. There's dough in it if the boys come up with enough varmints to collect plenty bounty money, but why does Sheriff Bosco suddenly find other important business in a far-off corner of the county just as coyote hunting becomes the order of the day? Well, friends and fellow chuckwagon chasers, there are coyotes and coyotes and even coyotes—as Puggy, Shoo-fly and Tug discover to their triple-tribulated

[*Turn page*]

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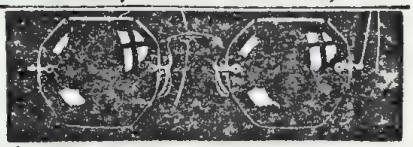

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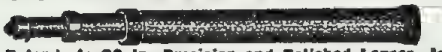

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misery when they tangle with them in the wild and woolly wilderness of Bucket Crick. But the three emerge as usual with nothing worse than a few inches of fur worn off their south ends, and a tearing thirst for the finer things of life.

L. P. Holmes winds his trigger-tried trio of trouble attracters into one of the world's wildest windies in RUN, COYOTE RUN, which gives next issue its due share of laughs without any let-down of action!

The additional novelets selected for the next issue will be GUNSMOKE ON THE RANGE by Charles N. Heckelmann, a yarn full of the old fighting spirit of the West and, WHELP OF THE FOX by Johnston McCulley, creator of "Zorro," the whip-wielding Californio who has long been one of the most popular characters of Western Fiction.

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MAIL CALL

ONE of the amazing things about stories of the Old West is that they are loved by young and old. There seems to be an all inclusive appeal to them that satisfies both boys and old men, girls as well as their mothers, who thrill to the daring and endurance of those who pioneered the frontier. Everyone, mostly, likes a good Western, as our letters from readers attest. Here's one from one of the seniors, though we certainly don't consider being sixty years young very "aged."

I have been reading the MASKED RIDER and enjoyed it very much. Wayne Morgan is wonderful and the whole book is good. I am an aged man of sixty and have been around some

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By JIM MAYO

in the September Issue of

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of the world. I enjoy all the Western stories very much.—*E. S. Toaly—Hopkinsville, Kentucky*

Who likes the high and lonesome? Foghorn Clancy was mentioning lately how population increases to the point where those who like the old ways best and like to live close to nature and far away from the hubub of modern cities, are hard put to it to discover their ideal spot. A reader from way up there comes to his rescue.

Dear old Foghorn, I saw in MASKED RIDER where you were looking for a town that wouldn't grow. Ouray, Colorado, on the Uncompghre River is the place you're looking for. And you can get to it via the million dollar highway number 550.—*Thomas E. Parker, Douecreek, Colorado.*

Hope that notice doesn't make all you folks rush out there and make the town grow in spite of Mr. Clancy and Mr. Parker.

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES by Walker A. Tompkins, we agree with many of our readers, was one of the best novels we have run. We are getting a flock of letters about it. Below are some samples.

I am sending you a line to let you know that I have been a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN ever since it came out, and I think the world of it. But I am just like Mr. Gleason, who had a letter in a recent issue—I would like to have you make a full-length portrait of the Masked Rider for me, too.

[*Turn page*]

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THE TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES was the best ever yet. Why don't you give us old readers more like it? For I am from the West, myself, and I know where lots of these places are, and I have been in them in Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Nebraska and Wyoming.

Here is a list of the favorite books that I have read since 1934:

1st MASKED RIDER WESTERN
2nd TEXAS RANGERS
3rd RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
4th THE RIO KID WESTERN

So you see I am a pretty old reader of these good Western books. So for my sake keep them coming out as often as possible. I beg to remain as ever your reading friend of Western stories.—*H. L. Moorman, 1461 So. Michigan Ave., Chicago 5, Illinois.*

Once a Masked Rider reader, always a Masked Rider reader—or so it would seem from the letters that have been coming in lately. It's a good habit, anyway. How could you spend a more wholesome evening than with the good old Robin Hood of the Range, Wayne Morgan, alias the Masked Rider?

I have just reread an old MASKED RIDER WESTERN, dated January, 1944, and a recent one of December, 1949. I don't know which one is the best. The old story, THE DEVIL'S RANGE, written by Donald Bayne Hobart, sure was a wonderful story. See if you can get more like it. THE TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES was good, but you have put out better. Blue Hawk is a good fighter. So long for now, from old reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.—*Mrs. Marie Tisley, Buena Vista , R. 1, Tennessee.*

Donald Bayne Hobart is still writing for us. He wrote some of the earliest Masked Rider novels and is still turning out swell Western yarns.

I like stories in the MASKED RIDER WESTERN very much, but I cannot get them on my newsstand. Will you please advise me at once if I can get them directly from your office? Please let me know by return mail.—*Louise Stockwell, R. F. D. 1, Troy, N. Y.*

If anyone finds themselves in the predicament of Louise Stockwell, be sure to let us know and we'll see what can be done about it.

Keep writing us, everybody. A postcard will do as well as a letter—and kindly address them to THE EDITOR, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks for listening to my palaver, folks! So long for now.

—THE EDITOR.

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*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

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